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DEC was Canada's leading distributor of political films from the 1970s through the 1990s with an emphasis on political use value and a passion for innovative film forms and activist distribution.

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Can there be a cinematic response to the growing fascination world-wide with authoritarian figures and spectacular acts of violence? In his epic documentary, *Reason/Vivek* (2019), Anand Patwardhan shows one way ...

[Failure and the feminist gaze: contesting the "female empowerment" narrative in contemporary Bollywood films](#)

by Mallika Khanna

Through an analysis of three contemporary "women-centric" films--*Angry Indian Goddesses*, *Veere Di Wedding* and *Lipstick Under My Burkha*--it's clear that Bollywood has put urban elite feminism on an aspirational pedestal, leaving marginalized women in other arenas largely unrepresented.

[Contemporary Tamil cinema and its departure from the mainstream: \*Manusangada/Cry Humanity\* and \*To Let\*](#)

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This essay details the pathbreaking changes in Tamil cinema for which it had to wait for a hundred years, new films, *Manusangada/Cry Humanity!* and *To Let*, that seriously challenge its tendencies.

[Fracturing nostalgia: the subversive dissonance of Vidya Balan's star-text](#)

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Apparently traditional, but intrinsically subversive, the many contradictions in Vidya Balan's star-text redefine femininity in contemporary Hindi cinema.

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[Curatorial Reflections: \*Letters of Love \(LOL\)\* from the Middle East to South Asia: A Trio of Transregional Genre Comedies](#)

by Samhita Sunya

Curator's essay on the U.S. premiere of a trio of contemporary stoner, gangster, and musical comedies, each of which unfolds a journey from the Middle East to South Asia.

[Pedagogy as weapon](#)

review by Shakti Jaisang

of *Teaching Transnational Cinema: Politics and Pedagogy*

by Katarzyna Marciniak and Bruce Bennett, Eds.

How might transnational cinema serve as a catalyst for bridging the divide between film theory and pedagogy?

[Bachchan Superman: Hindi cinema in Egypt, 1985-1991](#)

by Claire Cooley

Indian cinema stars such as Amitabh Bachchan left Egyptian listeners smitten through their presence in theaters and on VHS and cassette.

### [The American and non-American ways of superhero cinema](#)

review by Ezra Claverie

of *Superheroes on World Screens*. Ed. Rayna Denison and Rachael Mizsei-Ward.  
This anthology looks at the ways a U.S. genre has traveled and transplanted itself overseas.

### **Other Asian cinemas**

#### [Third World cinema, queer technique, and Manila's multiple characters](#)

review by Josen Diaz

of *Manilla by Night* by Joel David

David sets the queer film against the dictatorship.

#### [From March of the Volunteers to Amazing Grace: the death of the main melody movie in the 21st century](#)

by Shuk-ting Kinnia Yau

Official Chinese policy regarding entertainment film in the late 20th and early 21st century was that a film should have a theme, a "main melody," that supported official ideology, but such films did not do so well commercially.

#### [Man on the thin line:](#)

##### [Chinese Cinema and capitalism's second coming](#)

review by Li Zeng

of *Economy, Emotion, and Ethics in Chinese Cinema: Globalization on Speed* by David Leiwei Li

Li uses film to explore the remaking of the Chinese subject due to rapid capitalist expansion.

#### [Sexual citizenship and social justice in the HKSAR:](#)

##### [Evans Chan's Raise the Umbrellas](#)

by Gina Marchetti

Using Evans Chan's documentary *Raise the Umbrellas* (2016) as a springboard, this essay examines the role gender identity and sexual orientation plays in Hong Kong's rich history of protest culture.

### **Gender representation: history, issues and genres**

#### [Transgender documentary subjects shaping "hirstory"](#)

by Chris Holmlund

Exploring trans\* "hirstory": ten documentaries, made from 1987 to the present, showcase trans\* leaders who fought for visibility, equality and justice in the United States during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.

#### [Writing less knowingly](#)

review by Rox Samer

of *Pink-Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries?* by Jane M. Gaines

Gaines asks how an earlier era of substantial women's film production labor came to an end, when we knew as much, and how as well as how this knowledge has shaped feminist film studies.

#### [Pedagogy and process, appropriation and authorship: two films by Jennifer Proctor](#)

by Sonia Lupher

A critical analysis of two experimental films by Jennifer Proctor that critique and revise harmful representations of women in audiovisual media, and includes an interview with Proctor.

#### ["ASMR" media and the attention economy's crisis of care](#)

by Racheal Fest

"ASMR" media invent and commoditize new forms of massively accessible love

and care, ameliorating from inside the attention economy the anxieties contemporary economic, political, and social conditions produce.

### [Soldiering for rights](#)

review by Shakti Jaising

of *Militant Visions: Black Soldiers, Internationalism, and the Transformation of American Cinema* by Elizabeth Reich

How might a study of the post-war cinematic black soldier prove beneficial for understanding contemporary representations of transgender service members in the U.S. military?

## **Pornography**

### [Gay pornography, in-custody abuse and the CCTV POV](#)

by Joseph Brennan

Joseph Brennan continues his development of the gay 'abuse porn' genre through an *in situ* reading of *Parole Him* and a large range of related gay porn sites; 'in-custody' is added to the gay abuse porn schema, together with concepts of the 'fuckable felon' and CCTV POV.

### [Guilty expenditure and the implicit image in 1960s sexploitation cinema](#)

review by Kevin Bozelka

of *Lewd Looks: American Sexploitation Cinema in the 1960s* by Elena Gorfinkel

Film scholar Elena Gorfinkel goes beyond the standard raincoat crowd mythology surrounding 1960s sexploitation cinema.

## **More book reviews**

### [On "surveillance capitalism"](#)

review by Victor Wallis

of *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight For a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* by Shoshana Zuboff

Is omni-surveillance the "new normal"? Can capitalism survive without it? Can humanity survive *with* it?

### [Unwatchable, but highly readable](#)

review by Mike Arnzen

of *Unwatchable*. Eds. Nicholas Baer, Maggie Hennefeld, Laura Horak, and Gunnar Iversen.

About films we might otherwise not watch on our own.

### [Looking back at the Red Army Faction](#)

review by Inez Hedges

of *Screening the Red Army Faction: Historical and Critical Survey* by Christina Gerhardt

Navigating the post-WWII German scene: origins and expressions of the Red Army Faction.

## **The last word**

### [About \*Jump Cut\*](#)

by Julia Lesage



# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Chuck at time of interview, summer 2017.

## "Just do it." Chuck Kleinhans speaks.

by [Brian Winston](#)

It's simple really..... what's with the movies that so many of us should spend a life-time worrying about them – especially if we are politically engaged? Surely there are more important areas of activism? And for Chuck and my generation, there was an added element of Anglophone intellectual disdain attached to the popular arts. Over the past couple of years, I have been recording interviews with folk seeking to understand how, given this unfertile context, we all came to cinema studies.

Talking to Chuck and Julia was crucial for this project. For one thing, their stellar contribution demonstrated that my vision of the field's marginality is way off the mark and that had to be acknowledged. The radical body of work Chuck has left us is a model of what engagement can mean and this conversation, I hope, illuminates its foundation. But more than that: this unavoidable task was no sweat. Every encounter with Chuck constantly confirmed the appositeness of his email handle – *chuckkle*. Nothing can be more missed than his needle-sharp amused take on the low dishonest times in which we live. And our field cannot more urgently need scholarship as committed and relevant as his to find our way through them.

We honoured Chuck and Julia at VisEv XXII in Toronto and their message to us then was a simple one: 'Just do it.' Chuck's life was a celebration of this injunction.

### Interview with Chuck Kleinhans, 2016 and 2017

BW: Tell us your tale.

Chuck: I grew up in the city of Chicago in a working-class neighborhood but then my family moved to the suburbs when I was in high school. There I was really alienated from the high school environment but got relief by going into downtown Chicago and seeing foreign films.

BW: Why foreign films?

Chuck: They were more interesting, an alternative to the culture I had to live in as a dependent child. Luckily my folks always expected that from the time I was about six-years old, I'd use public transport to go anywhere in Chicago – that was just taken for granted. My first real interest in film was seeing works like the *Cranes Are Flying* and most of the neo-realist films that came with the arrival of European art films in the late 1950s to the United States.

Then I went to University of Wisconsin from 1960-64. A small film theatre in the student union made a practice of programming the latest films just released in New York. So I saw and was incredibly moved by films like *Shadows*, all kinds of work by the realists, Lionel Rogosin, and revivals of classic works I hadn't seen earlier. Wisconsin had a terrific film society, one of the best in the country at the



Attending Park Ridge High School in favorite beret.





The oldest child in Chicago and Park Ridge family.



USS Compton, Chuck's ship.

time, so you could fill in your film education that way.

But my main interest was in theatre, and I was involved in an alternative theatre group sponsored by the religious society and campus groups, Mime and Man Theatre. We did the Theatre of the Absurd as it was just emerging — everything that couldn't be done in the University theatre. So I was involved with all this alternative stuff.

BW: Were you involved as an actor or a director?

Chuck: Stage work. But because the plays were sponsored by a religious group they wanted an educational factor, so at the end of every performance we had a discussion between cast, crew, any of the audience that wanted to stay, and a professor. That became my greatest interest. I remember that when we did a Camus play, *Germaine Brée* — the scholar from the French Department who knew Camus personally — came and talked with us about it. Mime and Man gathered this incredible loyalty. We were doing this eccentric thing in the Midwest, putting on Theatre of the Absurd, and at the same time we were building a very loyal audience. That shaped the way I thought media and theatre could be used.

I was also a photographer and the photography editor of both my high school and college year book. I'd been doing journalism and sports photography at high school so I was really used to being in an environment of taking images while moving fast and documenting things.

BW: Were you aware of a cultural hierarchy of film being at the bottom of the pecking order?

Chuck: Only faintly. My father had been raised as a Methodist so there was a family suspicion of mass entertainment. He always applied a formula that a film should be uplifting. I remember once having this discussion with him when I was in about 7th or 8th grade. I'd gone to see a double bill and one film was a mindless farcical comedy by a television comedian George Gobel, who played a dumb guy. I wanted to see it because I had seen Gobel's TV show then wanted to see his movie. The double bill had a Humphrey Bogart film, *The Harder They Fall*. I came back and said, "I didn't like that George Gobel film, but I liked the Humphrey Bogart one." My father, who loved Humphrey Bogart, said, "Yes, that's the difference — one is very depressing but you gained something from it, didn't you?" It was like some moral education, dealing with something profound.

BW: Was your background radical?

Chuck: Well, my family background was Taft Republican/Midwestern Republican, which was the norm. When I went off to college I lived in an inexpensive rooming house with a bunch of New Yorkers, who included some former CP-oriented people. One was Gene Dennis, who was the son of Eugene Dennis Sr., who had been indicted under the Smith Act for being the head of the Communist Party in 1952, jailed for eight years, and recently let out to die of cancer. When I met this guy Gene, we were just playing football and running around and doing stuff together. I knew he had these really crazy, radical, left ideas, but I didn't know the fact of who he was until someone from New York said that his father was the head of the Communist Party. I said, "No, I didn't know that!" [laughs]

At the same time I had already signed up for Naval R.O.T.C.. After college, I went off to spend two years in active duty in the Navy. Going in three weeks before Tonkin Gulf, I was serving during the beginning of the Vietnam War. But even with that commitment, I incorporated this funny kind of skepticism. When I was



USS Compton, maybe with Chuck there.



Grad school in 80s, Bloomington IN.



Wedding picture taken by the judge.

in R.O.T.C., my social group were these New York Lefties. I would go to the military ball on a Saturday night after which there was always an anti-military ball on Sunday [laughs], and I would go to both!

I loved being in the Navy: driving ships around in the ocean is one of the greatest things in the world. The military as an institution is absolutely oppressive and stupid, and it tolerates and promotes stupidity, so it was easy to be skeptical. It was also easy to be skeptical of the Vietnam War. In fact, if you were in the Navy all your training involved working with the model of counter-insurgency; you know, you work in the grassroots, you build up your local base. But of course the Vietnam War was run by the Army and Air Force who didn't know what the hell they were doing. They thought they could bomb peasants out of existence and commit other atrocities and win a conventional war. If you were in the Navy, you would be skeptical.

My work in the Navy also relates to my film career. I was assigned to a small destroyer that was mostly used for training purposes, so we only had half of a regular crew because we brought on these reservists and took them out for a week or weekend for their training and then brought them back. I was the most junior officer but had more power than any other junior officer would have at that stage because we were a training ship. So I was immediately elevated to the position of first lieutenant, which means you're in charge of the entire deck division. This normally would have taken two years to get to. I'm also the junior officer on board. The guy who was my senior officer – in terms of the watches that we were keeping – was a bachelor who loved movies and he wanted to see at least two or three movies a night.

In the Navy you get these Hollywood films, and the crew, the officers, and the non-commissioned officers watch them, so the same movie gets watched three times on three different projectors. Every time I had duty with this guy I had to be the projectionist so I got used to showing two or three movies a night. I've seen every Beach Party movie ever made about five times; I saw every Western from the late 1950s and early 1960s at least ten times. I got this incredible education in mainstream films, just by watching these movies.

And I also got the greatest insight into ideology and mainstream film. It happened when we showed *Doctor Strangelove*. All the officers thought it was hilarious because it criticized the Air Force and they were such dummies, weren't they?! And I'm sitting there thinking, "Yes! Those Air Force guys are such assholes!" Wait a minute; ideology, how does it work in films?! [laughs]

Then I go back to grad school at Indiana University and I do theatre studies and literary theory, mostly from a French perspective because my main language was French. Again I'm in comparative literature — I'm doing theory and theatre and





Paris in the 80s.



Julia in Paris in the 80s.

then decide to do my dissertation on farce in late nineteenth century France and England, a pretty unconventional topic at that time. I went to grad school with bad grades actually, so I made A's the first year to show that I could do it. But I also almost immediately get involved in the underground newspaper. I joined the underground paper that fall; we were the voice of the anti-war student-reform left at the time in 1966 at Indiana University. Later Julia arrived at IU in about 1970/71.

Because I got involved in the activist anti-war left as a veteran, I came at it from a slightly different position than the other parts of the anti-war movement did. In the student reform movement, I was in a sort of postgraduate-style-SDS called New University Conference that faculty and graduate students formed. As staff who were trying to forge a New Left approach to higher education, we had an incredible critique of that institution. I worked for NUC for years as an organizer and was sent as a project organizer to Michigan, so I was a paid underground outside agitator for a year in the middle of graduate school, which was a healthy thing to do.

Then I ran into Julia and she was all interested in film; I liked film, but I wasn't obsessed with it. I was already versed in Continental theory. Then when I go to Julia's dorm room, she says these are the books you need to know about film; read those six books and you're fine. Julia's going off to France to meet and interview Godard, unaware that he had just had a motorcycle accident and wasn't available to anyone. Our plan was to go to Paris, meet up with Godard and interview him about how Brecht had influenced him. I'm going as a tag-along and I'm writing my dissertation, by hand, in Paris at the time.

Julia says, "Oh, the *Cahiers du Cinema* editors are going to have this workshop at the Avignon theatre festival." And I hear "theatre festival" and it's like oh great! So Avignon has a theatre festival, and I'm really eager to go since all the best groups from Europe are going to be there. During the daytime, which is dead time during a theatre festival, *Cahiers du Cinema* editors are having a workshop – this is just as they had become super Maoist. I'm happy to go to that because every afternoon they'll be showing another movie. The workshop showed films by Godard and Gorin in their Dziga Vertov period, very didactic, and also widescreen documentaries from Maoist China. So, we go to hear these supposedly most advanced Marxist and Leninist thinkers talk about film and it takes about half an hour to figure out what's wrong with them. It's conclusive by the time you get to lunch when these five or six guys who have been holding forth (I always thought *discuter* meant discuss, not proclaim what the truth is from their point of view) at about a quarter to noon when their girlfriends come in in their sundresses carrying their little bags from shopping that morning and they all go off to lunch; and in the afternoon there is going to be a movie. At that point, after going through this thing, I figure if these are supposed to be the smartest people in Marxist and Leninist film criticism and I can see what's wrong with them, then maybe I have something to contribute here. Then to cap it all off, we went to the UK and the BFI summer workshop run by Sam Rohdie in Sterling, Scotland. That clinched it. I had been sitting in Paris reading Althusser as well as having read Barthes, and I come in and these people depend on their secretary for translations.

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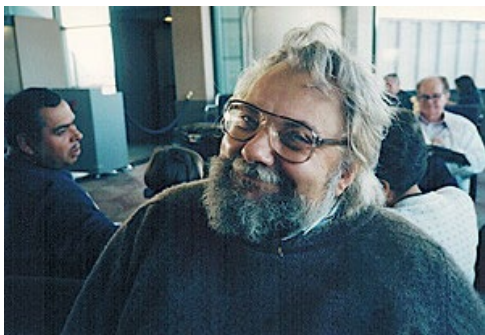




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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



BW: This is a continuation of the recording we began in August 2016 in Bozeman. But this time we are in Eugene, Oregon, on 20th February, 2017. So where did we get to. We'd got to 1979.

I know you'd misbehaved at a Sterling BFI Conference. I know that you weren't impressed with the "heavy" mob at all and I know that you went to all these various meetings which convinced you that you guys now felt you could contribute to film studies. We last left it where you were going to a Sterling meeting and you were going to see a film or program by Sam Rohdie.

Julia: I was visiting in London shortly before the first time I went to one of those BFI workshops. At the BFI in London, a group of the forthcoming workshop leaders were looking at *She Wore A Yellow Ribbon* to see how it related to the workshop topic of realism. I went to that black and white screening with them and said, "As I recall from my childhood that was a color film because she wore a yellow ribbon?!" [laughs] They didn't believe that.

Chuck: To get copyright protection Hollywood had to deposit a print with the BFI. So they just sent over a black and white print, and the BFI people just never figured it out!

Julia: I just told them that I recalled that it was in color; the point of the title was the soldiers' yellow bandana. They didn't believe me. Chuck wasn't with me then. When I came back, I told him the British film folks were taking these Hollywood films as a serious comment on life in the United States whereas we'd see them as satire and laugh at them because of how exaggerated they are.

Chuck: These films had a level of social criticism exactly the same as you would find in the Sunday supplement magazines in the 1950s or in the journals and papers in columns like, "Can this marriage be saved?" It was the same sort of social criticism, you know, that goes on in educated middle-class circles of discussion. It's like in *All that Heaven Allows* when Cary looks through the television set that her kids had given her and she sees her own reflection, and that gesture seems to mean something profound – like everyone already knew that. Sirk was recreating a well-known meme of the time. But in the UK Sirk was seen as offering a startling criticism of the US and it seemed to the *Screen* folk that no one had realized this level of critique before.

Julia: So the next year these *Screen* articles came out looking at Sirk as Brechtian. I'd written my dissertation on Godard as Brechtian ...

Chuck: You hadn't finished your dissertation by that point. You were writing it, but the reason we'd gone to Europe that summer in 1971 was that you could interview Godard.

Julia: Well, that was my experience at the first BFI summer school I went to. I did meet Angie Martin and she continues to be a great friend. She told me these really peculiar things about the UK. For example, Angie had an education degree and she didn't think that was a real degree. I was totally shocked by that! In the US, that's a respected degree. Angie told us the next year when both Chuck and I went to the BFI summer school, there'd been this rebellion at the BFI. The clerical staff were no longer going to do the typing for the men, so the guys'd have to do it themselves. This was a big victory. We got a glimpse of a different sort of intellectual life in the US and UK. Later, in *Jump Cut*, when we started to get some articles from some British film scholars, it felt like they knew nothing of footnotes. We would assign one of our collective to go and write up footnotes for



many of those articles.

Chuck: UK intellectuals just assumed other intellectuals would know what important writers said. For example, Sam Rohdie sent us this article. I wrote back to him about paragraph seven or eight saying he was just paraphrasing, or block-quoting without signaling authorship to the reader. But anyone who knew about the field would have known the unattributed use of this material. He responded that these were just “ideas in the air”?! What a weird idea.

Julia: The US education system drew many of its ideas from the German system.

Chuck: I always thought it was the British pattern of the university education being based on these short essays. If you’re working with your tutor they know what you’re writing about so they didn’t need to know where you were looking. You learned it in high school, how to write papers. At graduate school in comparative literature, our program was dominated by these German scholars who were extremely, rigorously vigorous about that. My tutor would check every footnote and correct them. He checked about 220 footnotes himself! I saw him in the library doing it. But I knew he would keep me anchored.

BW: Cultural studies inflects film studies. Your reading of film studies, was it to take Hollywood seriously? That they didn’t know what they were doing?

Julia: They were serious about studying Hollywood. Parts of the whole cultural movement at the time that I wasn’t particularly fond of asserted ideas like the text constructs the subject, subjectivity is not cohesive, realism should be attacked, and Brecht was tied into postmodernism and a kind of avant-garde that was just a perpetual deconstruction. In fact, one part of the cinematic avant-garde was looking at the apparatus at that time. Another section was looking at the lyrical or the autobiographical. I myself always had an interest in documentary (which had been left out of the discussion). I was irritated by assertions of unbreachable dichotomies like the title of the magazine, *m/f*, with the slash representing the barrier between masculine and feminine. And I remember Raymond Bellour came through town in Evanston IL once and gave a lecture at Northwestern talking about *Rebecca*, saying that cinematic language was totally patriarchal. Afterwards in the discussion, I responded, “Every revolution is created by a group of people who live in a hegemonic culture that is not their own, they speak the “masters” language. Some of the things they make changes to are the things they can imagine. Revolution always comes partly from the language of the masters.”

BW: What about the quote about the master’s tools can never break the masters house?

Julia: I think it’s there and creates some of the big tensions in major social movements. I certainly saw it in Nicaragua where some old structures and attitudes perversely remained. But I think that there’s no place outside of the world – as if you could have a little pure place over here and from there you can go attack the masters.

BW: What year did you go down to Nicaragua?

Chuck: Julia went to teach super8 with a Sandinista labor union workshop in Managua in about 1979/80. It was a year after the anniversary of the revolution – 1980/81. We went together to a language school in Esteli in 1984 and then worked teaching video with the labor union where we shot a lot of footage with them. We then went back and the first thing Julia showed them was the slideshow we made into a video. Then you [Julia] went back in 1987 to work with the MINT (Ministry of Interior) for a while.

BW: Chuck, let’s go back to your work history. You said in Montana about how you got a job, Julia is already teaching at the University of Illinois in Chicago, and you’re driving a school bus for disabled kids?







Chuck: I had many jobs at the time. I was working for Citizens in Action, where we went door-to-door opposing the first big freeway that was going to be built through eight working-class neighborhoods. We organized against that and it was very successful. It was a community organizing project kind of like what Obama started.

But then I was also applying for teaching jobs and I got an adjunct job first at Chicago State University. It is on the far south side of Chicago where 90% of the students are black and their families didn't go to college. But I had taught a course on African-American literature in grad school at Indiana, so there was some entrée into teaching at State. Plus I'd taught some intro to remedial writing. I got hired there at State as contingent faculty and learned a lot about teaching remedial writing so I had to reprogram myself to become a remedial writing scholar. With that, I managed to get into North Eastern University, which was a white, working-class and Latino university on the northwest side of Chicago. It's the neighborhood where I grew up, so it was very familiar to me. They had these storefronts where I would go and teach English as a second language; as the students would be learning English from me, they would simultaneously get their first two years of college in Spanish. So they could take history, biology in Spanish and finally get their skill level up in English so that they could then go on to the main campus. They had a 45% retention and graduation rate, which was phenomenal.

Meanwhile, we started *Jump Cut* and Paddy Whannel, who was at Northwestern, started to meet us more often socially. Peter Wollen had this job there that was split between the English Department and Radio, Television and Film. Then English decided that they didn't want to do anything more with film and didn't really like Peter, so they cancelled out Peter's thing. It was a super snobby English Literature Department. RTF didn't have the money to replace his salary in film, didn't have enough to keep him. Laura Mulvey was simply a faculty wife and was treated as such by everyone. She was given no credit for any intellectual thought of her own. Yet she was the chair of the 1974 Chicago Women's Film Festival. Peter goes back to the UK where a job opens up at the University of East Anglia and he becomes one of the first film lecturers there. By that point, because Peter had been in RTF, all the graduate students realized they knew this stuff that none of the other faculty did.

BW: So they had Paddy Whannel?

Chuck: Jack Ellis hired Paddy, who then brought over Peter and Laura. At the end of the summer that we were at the BFI in 1971, we had dinner with Peter and Laura in London to talk about the job that Peter was going to in the United States.

Julia: And I'm teaching at the University of Illinois in Chicago.

Chuck: Northwestern then fires Peter in 1975 and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith fills in at RTF for one disastrous semester. In the fall of 1976 the graduate students revolt and go out on strike. They had no power. They demanded that the department has to hire someone to replace Peter because no one else in the RTF faculty can teach anything about contemporary theory. They were "allowed" to TA and they demanded to get paid for grading papers. So for about a week and a half the graduate students refused to go to class. Finally the Dean panicked and gave the department some money to deal with this.

At that point Paddy, in classic Paddy style, asks Patricia to have a dinner at which I would be invited to with Julia. We go to Patricia's house which is actually a penthouse apartment because her husband was one of the most successful



corporate lawyers in Chicago. We go there and Patricia, who is still a graduate student, serves us some frozen lasagna meal. I don't know exactly why I am there. At the end Paddy says, "Can we talk for a moment? Chuck, would you be interested in teaching a couple of courses for us?" I asked what he had in mind and he said the contemporary film theory course but I could also pick anything else I wanted. I had about four five weeks to get my act together. I started in the spring and chose experimental film, which was another course that needed to be taught. Towards the end of that term, the department said I was very successful and that they would like to me to teach that next year for the whole year, 1977-78. That's how I ended up in Northwestern and I was there for the rest of my career.

Julia: I was fired three times in four years for being a radical and then I was blacklisted for about twelve years. As a videomaker I travelled around and got some quarter or semester gigs and went to Nicaragua a few times. I had the fortune of being married and having a base income so with my unemployment checks, I could get a video camera and stuff like that. I learned video production in that space of time — I already knew film production.

When I got hired in Oregon it was mainly for video production. That was 1988-ish. In Chicago, there was a very nice independent film community everybody went to each other's screenings and saw each other's work. I asked a few of my women video-maker friends how to do the technical part of it — they said I could just get on with making my own work.

Chuck: There was a very strong video community in Chicago and I took my first class there which was taught on a Saturdays to teachers in the Chicago public school system who wanted to learn more about video making. You'd take five or six classes and learn how to make video — it would empower people in the community and was very progressive.

Julia: I learned about timecode and later sat in on a course at the Art Institute. It was just a very close-knit community. There were festivals across the country about women directors and women's film and video. Some very memorable work played that was never seen again. I was later asked to speak at a number of these events.

Making media has strongly influenced my teaching and writing. I've always been a firm believer that people who write film criticism should do some form of media practice. If you can't understand the construction of sound and image, then you don't know what film or video is. I think that I've really appreciated learning from industry studies. My teaching and my own writing have always been focused on this is how it's put together.

BW: Chuck, did you have some problems as a desperate radical?

Chuck: They didn't trust me. It was a little odd in the sense that I came on the job market in 1972. The bottom had fallen out in hiring literature teachers at that point. When the first wave of the baby boomers arrived in the 1960s at the universities, all the state schools expanded. Then there was actually a decline with not as many people going for higher education. In the meantime the schools had stacked up all these profs who would often get tenure without publications since the schools then just needed bodies to keep talking to students. So there was this gap.

When I finished my degree was in the first years of this decline — very few people



in the humanities were getting hired as there were only a few jobs. Julia got a tenure-track job because she was working in film; my background was originally in 19th century theatre in France and England. I had no particular academic future at that point. When I first showed up at Chicago State I had a background in teaching African American students. And at Chicago State I got involved with a group of people who were excellent progressive teachers of remedial writing for disadvantaged students. I then transferred the same skills up to Northeastern Illinois and taught English as a second language. Then Paddy Whannel needed someone to fill in.

At Northwestern I took the job but I never expected to get tenure because I'm too leftist. It was a very conservative institution at the time; the president was a Chicago School economist. I just assumed tenure wasn't possible so I just did what I wanted. I thought that I'd gotten this job for a little while and then I'd have to go and get another. For example, the department never let me teach the freshmen since I might contaminate them with Marxist ideas.

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Outside office in Annie Mae Swift at Northwestern University.



The Speech Annex where film was taught, a quontset hut.



Surrounded by stacks of papers and books at work and at home.



At home in Chicago writing.

Actually, when I first started to teach the freshmen, I taught basic production. Ellen Seiter, who had just gotten her MFA, and Michelle Citron – the feminist filmmaker – and I redesigned the introduction to production curriculum, which was in a sorry state at the time. The department had split between broadcast (radio and TV) and film. Broadcast were the leftists and film the rightists, with Paddy running his own little cohort. Students complained bitterly about their production classes, so the Dean said “we gotta go fix it.” Michelle arrived, who was an unknown quantity, and I had just arrived and I knew something about teaching introductory studies. They let us have full control of the introductory production course, and we redesigned it completely. We started teaching feminism from the ground up, and stuff like this. Well, for the first two or three years, the other faculty didn’t realize that their students were going to arrive in advanced classes asking, “How come there aren’t any women directors listed in this class?” which drove them nuts. It took a while for them to catch on.

In the meantime there were some very fierce struggles. What happened was that Ellen was hired for a year as a replacement for the main production teacher. He was your classic 6’5” male and a documentary filmmaker; the MFA program had just started then, too. And Ellen was the one woman production teacher with six guys. The ethos was you could only be a filmmaker if you could carry a camera on your shoulder and run around. You know, the whole masculine ethos. When Michelle arrives and Ellen is in charge, suddenly there is a completely different atmosphere. Before, women students had always gone to the television side because you could learn television and understand it by being an understudy in each position. The camera assistant would put a newbie in and they would spend six months learning before that person graduates and so forth. You know, learning television production was accessible to women in a way that film wasn’t. So Michelle and Ellen start going off at lunchtime to the gym to lift weights together, and then suddenly you’ve got this whole cohort of women going with them to go to the gym to lift weights.

So then the boys start resenting this. As the women start making feminist style films, so the guys have this massive reaction of making films where women are raped and assaulted. Those films, of course, start causing problems and then you have this environment where you have at the end of year screenings, women shouting and stamping their feet at how sexist some film is. Then the boys start crying [laughs], then there is reaction and resentment. Then you have the opposite reaction when the women start showing films that even slightly hint at feminism. It did turn into a horrible mess.

So around that time, and this is probably the most political thing we did, we said that for the following year we wouldn’t accept work that had a lot of violence in it. Of course, we were accused of squelching free speech and freedom of expression. Then the faculty passed a resolution against things like this. But what we came back with, which I thought was very clever, was that actually we were upholding broadcast standards. You know, you can’t actually show this on television, so why should we allow students to make this sort of film. It was great because a more conservative woman on the faculty accepted it because it made sense to her; it gave her a way of dealing with this situation.

So I went on my merry way and I knew that I wouldn’t get any form of promotion or commendation. I was totally surprised that I got tenure. I hadn’t anticipated getting that. I was embarrassing the administration; I was teaching things like pornography and showing avant-garde experimental films. I could never really teach documentaries because Jack Ellis always did, but I liked being the outsider



Chuck and John Hess, co-editors on Chicago back porch.



Three editors reading manuscripts in Berkeley.



Chuck and Julia commuted between Chicago and Eugene OR for many years. Especially when living alone, Chuck took many selfies. Here are a series of them, the last one revisiting a childhood haunt, the Super Dawg drive-in, with Julia.



or the bad boy. As a department, we were also downgraded because we were below the regular humanities – they had a very low regard for us – but you never really had to impress them. We did form alliances with the theatre department. Again, in Theater there was a group who was very much oriented toward practice with some critical theory, so I was always able to get along with those people.

BW: So when and how does *Jump Cut* start?

Chuck: We had all the tools because I was a journalist in high school and I'd done editing and I had worked in the underground press. In the last year that we were in Bloomington at Indiana University, which was 1972/73, John Hess and his then wife, Judith, became somewhat more radicalized and Judy got a job in Northern California and Julia got a job in Chicago. They were both film people, and John was a film person too. I had never taken a film class but I got interested from hanging out with Julia and going to France to see the screenings over the summer. I realize I was smarter than most people and had much better politics, too. I can remember we were actually sitting having a coffee in the university library and saying, "We should start a film journal," because John published something in *Film Quarterly* and Julia and I had published something too. *Women and Film* had started and Julia had written for them and then they asked me so I submitted and published there. We were engaged in writing film criticism locally and stuff like that. Then we had this casual conversation in which we said we want to publish our own stuff, we want a broader span than *Women and Film*, so we thought we should just do that. In a crazy way we just decided that John and I had extra time because we didn't have full-time employment so we could just start a full magazine. We agreed about it in December when John came to Chicago for a meeting.

BW: But the way you just described it was that it was entirely in opposition. So it wasn't limited to women and it wasn't anti-intellectual – so what was it? Did you write a paper like John Foster Kane, you know, on principles?

Chuck: The first editorial is that. We had posters that we put out first to try and get some articles. The first article was a statement essentially saying that we know you know what a jump cut is. Roger Ebert uses the term jump cut without explaining it in his newspaper columns. So it was like, "You're interested enough in film to know what a jump cut is." That's a term that everyone knows.

BW: Was it a jump cut in terms of development?

Julia: Absolutely.

Chuck: It was kind of validating the classic Godardian jump cut. It doesn't have to be this long, smooth, elegant movie magazine. We're just going to get out there and say these things.

Julia: We sort of declared early on that we were left and feminist and that there were directors in Hollywood who were very interesting, I don't know what else we said.

BW: When was the first issue?

Chuck: The first issue came out in 1974. We formed the idea the previous spring; we started with it and solidified it in Christmas 1973.

BW: People make so much about when you gave a little talk to everybody at Visible Evidence in Toronto. The pair of you said, "Come on, imagine something, and get off your butt and just do it." But was it really quite hard?

Julia: No, it wasn't. Chuck insisted that first of all you take a little narrow column and you paste on it little sheets of ruled paper and take that to the printer.

Chuck: The whole thing was produced on this electric typewriter.





Julia: And Chuck will have to tell you about typing the first issue.

Chuck: No, you tell them.

Julia: It was very funny. Chuck insisted on typing and laying out the whole of the first issue himself. But he was a little frantic and then the day we had to go to the printer, layout was not quite finished, so Chuck said to me: "Tell them to go fuck themselves!"

Chuck: I remember calling Julia up because we had a deadline for delivery and I called her at 10:30 a.m. totally frantic and desperate. And Julia said, "Calm down, calm down. I'll be home this afternoon. Don't worry!" I phoned the printer and arranged to bring in the material in a few days.

Chuck: We never justify the text but we did have a proportional Selectric typewriter spacing letters, so it became a little more elegant.

Julia: In any case we eventually got a typist, which was good. I just told the printer somebody was sick and it was going to take a couple more days.

BW: But it is amazing and this was out of your own money?

Julia: I think that's very interesting. For almost all of the life of *Jump Cut*, from beginning to end, we each put a thousand dollars into the printing – so about \$3000 between us. In other words, that was the cost of the printing and eventually the cost of the printing plus the envelopes and the mailing.

Chuck: We did the mailing by hand first, which was crazy.

Julia: There were little groups that took *Jump Cut* to bookstores.

Chuck: In Chicago there was a little film community and people knew about us. Part of it was that there were helpful people at Northwestern, including Russell Campbell. When we published the first issue, he invited me to come up to campus with an armload of the things. He said, "Oh, there is this new magazine and this guy Chuck." He introduced me to film theory classes and suggested that people buy a copy of *Jump Cut*. I sold a couple of copies to students at film screenings there. People started asking when we were going to have another issue and that they would like to write something for it.

Then we started to have *Jump Cut* Collective meetings; people would come over to our place on Saturdays and that was fun. The same thing happened in Berkeley: John got divorced from his wife and moved down to Berkeley, which was a more interesting place to live. He was doing the same thing by selling *Jump Cut* at the Pacific Film Archive and meeting curious people there. They were then invited over on Saturdays to his house to help put out the next issue. So it was like these people that would arrive. We'd read and discuss things and people would decide if an essay was good or what they didn't like. Then after that they would smoke some dope and maybe go out or cook some food. In Berkeley there was this hot tub place that everyone went to where they would just sit around naked soaking. It was a classic hippy enterprise.

BW: One of the characteristics of classic hippy enterprises is that they are no longer with us and you guys are all that is left.

Julia: We changed to not having collective meetings.

Chuck: I don't remember when they stopped. It must've been with people moving to different places. John and Julia and I always worked together collectively.

BW: Your agenda didn't change. You were still interested in new material and political context.





Julia: Oh here's an interesting fact. We couldn't afford a lot of phone calls so we have a huge amount of correspondence, especially between Chuck and John about manuscripts and *Jump Cut*. We want to get that put up at the Pacific Film Archives or the Academy of Motion Pictures because it's one of the only written records of a small magazine like this, precisely because it wasn't being handled by computers, it was being handled by personal letters. So we have that material. In fact, we thought of going to an all-in electronic format earlier than we did. We surveyed all of our editorial board and people we thought were interested, but they all wanted a paper journal, not an electronic one. When we've finally went all electronic, what became clear relatively soon was that we could publish and add a lot of still pictures. Now the advantage is that we can publish 50 to 60 frame grabs per essay.

Chuck: Now people who have themselves grown up learning from very heavy use of frame grabs for their essays have set a model for other people who know they can publish their essays in *Jump Cut* with these photographs. All the other publishers are scared shitless.



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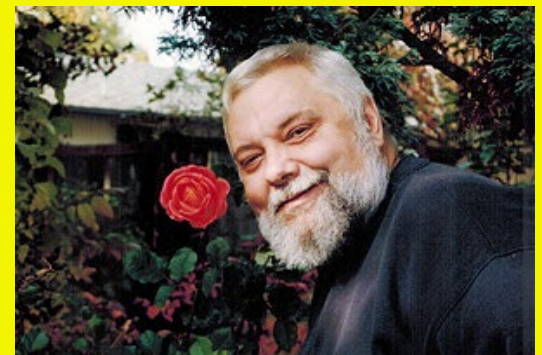
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# media salad

writing by  
Chuck Kleinhans



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## Remarks to Caucus on Class SCMS Chicago 2016

by Chuck Kleinhans

1. a good time for class analysis
2. positive mix of views; a diversity of reasons for Trump's win and thus a diversity of responses to changing the future
3. some subordinate (fight for control of Democratic Party)
4. both class and intersectionality
5. three strategies
6. back to basics
7. set clear priorities, be efficient
8. work locally, form alliances nationally and globally
9. where class politics matters
10. where it can be productively introduced
11. e.g. healthcare—a right, who is being excluded
12. taxes: who pays, who benefits
13. education as a public good (loans, community, etc.) alliance of students, families and communities

I'm sorry I can't be present in person at the Caucus meeting. My brother was hospitalized a few days ago and I had to leave Atlanta yesterday to be with him in Urbana Illinois. I was asked to make some remarks to the group to help boost our spirits and our caucus within SCMS. Certainly the present moment in the US is a remarkable one for thinking about class and acting with a class aware politics. We actually have a Presidential campaign in which the words "democratic socialism" are openly spoken. We have a general awareness in the population of what decades of income inequality mean today, ranging from intellectuals who read Piketty to working people who have seen their incomes stagnate or decline while the super-rich grow in wealth and power. This is a great time to talk about class!

I have three general observations that I hope will help us think about what we can do.

One is based in the history of the Caucus on Class. I would remind us old timers, and inform the newer members, that the Caucus originally came out of concentrated efforts in the 1980s to present programs at the annual meetings on "race and class." Most of the participants would also call themselves feminist, and most of the emphasis was on teaching, especially at schools including community colleges where race and class were close to the student body. So, in a significant way the Caucus dealt with "intersectionality" before that became a known term. As SCMS grew, more caucus and interest groups proliferated, and a newly formed Black caucus addressed race particularly, followed by a Latino caucus, and so forth. For a while all the caucuses were scheduled for the exact same meeting time so people had to choose which one was most important to them.

The Caucus on Class did continue in the 1990s, but at a certain point became mired in what I remember as a mindless sectarianism as a small group tried to force its views and programs on everyone else using bully tactics. After that group departed, the Caucus continued on but did not reach its full potential.

Therefore my first observation has to end with an appeal for people to rise above sectarianism and squabbling. SCMS is not a significant battle front in the present time. It is a somewhat useful professional organization that can be a staging area for connecting different people, encouraging those who want to do class analysis. Let's use it for that. We have our own and other political positions such as Black Lives Matter, or Boycott, Divest, and Sanction that are better served locally and on our own campuses, not with trying to pass sweeping resolutions. Let's use our energy wisely and efficiently.

Second, I would point out that we need a large scale class analysis of media. In the past few decades there has been a welcome convergence for many of what was often divided: I mean a political economy analysis and a critical cultural analysis. Divided in the past by departments, methodologies, and often objects of study, today we see the fusion of industrial economic studies with sophisticated critical textual analysis. John Caldwell's *Production Cultures* book is just one example of many such works. And I would also point out that SCMS itself is today a much more international organization. U.S. people, in particular, need to be aware that class analysis has been going on as a regular part of media studies around the world. And to read it and learn from it.

A related point: to consider class means to study the relationship of all classes. There's often been in the past, especially in the U.S., an understandable veering toward class analysis that takes the industrial working class as the norm. Of course, this connects with the powerful work that has been done within Marxism in discussing class. But I'd remind everyone that while Marx used a large scale analysis of class in the first two books of *Capital*, it is only at the end of volume III where he begins to discuss the complexities of the major divisions and the "in-betweens" and after two or three pages, the manuscript ended. Therefore anyone who wants to do serious class analysis needs to also study the work of sociologists, historians, political scientists, and economists. We need a rich discussion in which many participate to understand this evolving and flexible system of capitalism. And that absolutely includes understanding intersectionality and how in a practical sense for many people "identity politics" are a more immediate and important aspect of their own oppression within the system.

Finally, let me point out that increasing class antagonism and separation operates within the profession of media studies, and within our own campus environments. This an especially urgent issue for graduate students and contingent faculty. This is a vital issue for our students who are trying to deal with constantly rising tuition and loans. The Caucus on Class cannot solve those matters, and I don't see much point in just passing some resolutions. Those issues are best engaged with groups that are already formed and in action: unions, coordinating groups for contingent faculty, student organizing on the local campus and city and state politics level, and so forth. We can be stronger and more effective by joining with others, by having an activist way of thinking, and keeping each other informed about all these possibilities.

I understand Chris Robé and others have been working on having an In Focus proposal for *Cinema Journal*. Excellent idea. And let me remind everyone that JUMP CUT always welcomes analyses of class issues in media. So, here's a toast to the future of Caucus: let's be energized by meeting each other and spreading the word, and work.





# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Ahmad rents (but does not own) the space for his food cart on a busy street in Manhattan's financial district. (*Man Push Cart*, 2005)



Ale runs between the auto shop where he works and the long procession of drivers looking for cheap repairs in the auto-focused Iron Triangle district of Willets Point. (*Chop Shop*, 2007)



Much of *Goodbye Solo* (2008) unfolds in the enclosed space of Solo's cab.

## Ghostly trajectories: neorealism and urban movement in Ramin Bahrani's "American Dream" trilogy

by [Kyle Miner](#)

Iranian American director Ramin Bahrani's first three U.S. films—*Man Push Cart* (2005), *Chop Shop* (2007), and *Goodbye Solo* (2008)—have in the years since their release been dubbed his "American Dream Trilogy." Small-scale, economically independent productions made in quick succession, the films tell distinct but narratively and aesthetically similar stories about immigrant characters striving for economic success and security in a post-9/11, pre-financial crisis United States. *Man Push Cart* follows Ahmad, an Iranian immigrant who operates a small food cart in Manhattan with hopes of paying off the loan on his cart and saving up for a larger apartment that will enable his young son to come live with him. Ale, the young protagonist of *Chop Shop*, lives in a small office above the titular Willets Point auto shop where he works off the books, saving his cash earnings in order to buy a food truck to operate with his sister Isamar. *Goodbye Solo*'s lead is a Senegalese immigrant (named Solo) who drives a taxi in Winston-Salem, saving up for his own cab while he prepares to take the exam to become a flight attendant. All three films have similar, minimalist narrative structures. The protagonists repeatedly perform the same respective routines of menial, service-oriented labor with the promise that it will propel them to a stage of economic stability and security, but that advancement is instead perpetually delayed through various obstacles, both social and economic.

To represent the tension between a (failing) struggle for social mobility and perpetual forward motion in the face of defeat, Bahrani develops this figurative running-in-place through formal techniques that emphasize routine and repetition. Of his characters, Bahrani notes that "all of them, in a way, can be connected to the myth of Sisyphus," a fitting comparison given that Ahmad, Ale, and Solo are depicted ever moving toward the same illusory goal (Scott). Ultimately, the spaces of commercial agency that the characters rely on to propel them to their intended next social and economic stages—and importantly, the spaces that provide most, but not all, of the capital through which they hope to attain this mobility—end up being spaces they cannot leave: Ahmad's cart is stolen just after he makes his final loan payment; Ale discovers the food truck he eventually purchases will require thousands of extra dollars to get up to code; and Solo fails his flight attendant exam.

In conceiving of Ahmad, Ale, and Solo as forever trapped by U.S. capitalist structures and economic forces, Bahrani in part refuses to yield to the Hollywood imperative that such narratives of struggle must result in cathartic deliverance from poverty. The narrative emphasis on the futility of the characters' repetitive work cycles challenges the traditional U.S. "rags-to-riches" stories that are so often the predominant vehicles for cinematic representations of the culturally and economically disenfranchised. In this way the films disrupt viewers' orientation toward more popular, commercially motivated "American Dream" narratives, in





Bahrani frequently films his characters moving through spaces of public transit: subways or busy city streets... (*Man Push Cart*, 2005)



... with a faux-documentary aesthetic seeming to capture life at street level. (*Chop Shop*, 2007)



The final frames of each film show the characters still trapped in the same non-places of transit and flow through which they've worked throughout the narratives. Ahmad is still working in a food cart before the morning rush, having lost the cart he finally owned. (*Man Push Cart*, 2005)



Ale and Isamar are still living in the office of a Willets Point auto shop, having lost their savings on a damaged food truck. (*Chop Shop*, 2007)

which traditional "bootstrap" myths are conveniently and neatly confirmed by the end of the film, when the characters ultimately achieve feel-good, hard-fought success just in time for audiences to leave the theater.

In emphasizing flat, repetitive routines of work and mundane details of characters' daily lives, Bahrani's common narrative and formal structure has prompted comparisons with neorealism.<sup>[1]</sup> [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) While I'm hesitant to label the films "neorealist"—discussed in more detail below—it is helpful to think about how some of their thematic and aesthetic affinities with neorealism and other "realist" movements can help further illuminate the sociopolitical function of certain narrative patterns and practices. I specifically want to look at the way movement—both physical and socio-economic—is represented through some of the formal and aesthetic sensibilities of neorealism. Indeed Bahrani's characters are almost always in motion. *Chop Shop*'s Ale and Carlos are consistently moving through New York streets and subway tunnels peddling candy, DVDs, and other quasi-legal goods. In *Man Push Cart*, Ahmad weaves through dark, pre-rush hour streets and alleys to get a coffee cart positioned for the morning rush in downtown Manhattan. And we follow Solo as he drives passengers through the streets of Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Yet in their perpetual motion Bahrani's protagonists chart trajectories through and around what Marc Auge calls "non-places"—those (mostly) ahistorical places of transit and flow that "cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity" and that thus "are not themselves anthropological places" (63). That the characters rely on such ahistorical and transitional spaces for most of their work and earnings (both commercially sanctioned and illicit) is especially important in understanding how Bahrani's trilogy offers a criticism of the American Dream mythos. We see Ahmad, Ale, and Solo performing various types of non-licensed work in the non-places through which they are constantly moving—selling pirated DVDs and other goods on the street, breaking down cars for parts, Solo using his cab to transport a drug-dealer friend—utilizing their access to these spaces as a means to secure the financial resources they need to move into the more traditional commercial spaces from which they've been excluded. I want to argue that in deploying what Michel de Certeau terms "tactics" in their negotiations of these non-places, Bahrani's characters reintroduce and maintain traces of cultural and economic history that in turn resignify them as (distinctly American) anthropological spaces. In acting both as reminders of capitalism's failures and neglects as well as commercial agents on their own terms, Bahrani's characters simultaneously manifest traces of exclusionary and oppressive capitalist systems in Auge's flattened non-places and also reintroduce the contingency and possibility for subversion that de Certeau terms necessary for "making do."

While it's tempting to read the films as narratives of heartbreaking failure—social immobility rendered in the harsh terms of cold realism and held up as a mirror to U.S. audiences—the tone at the end of each is inflected with subtle hints of hope. Ahmad's interaction with a final pre-dawn customer returns the rhythm of the film to the procedural, self-propelled calm of the opening sequence. The camera makes an uncharacteristically swift movement upward and away from Ale and Isamar to follow birds taking flight. Solo's somber drive down from Blowing Rock is filmed in a tranquil, meditative long shot. In returning to Bahrani's comparison with the myth of Sisyphus, the films suggest that it may be an error to ever expect the characters to move beyond a certain socio-economic point in the first place. Far from a troubling acceptance of the characters' socio-economic immobility, the films' repetitive structures suggest that for many of those like Ahmad, Ale, and Solo, the "American Dream" may be more an engine of movement than a real destination. In keeping with this reality Bahrani is able to find real sites of struggle (and sometimes temporary victories) as opposed to escapist wish



Solo is still on the road, driving back from a final, unresolved confrontation with his friend William, having failed his exam and interview for a flight attendant position. (*Goodbye Solo*, 2008)



Ahmad stops to sell some pirated DVDs to men he passes on the street, as Bahrani and his cinematographer film unnoticed from about a block away. (*Man Push Cart*, 2005)



Bahrani notes that even though Willets Point scenes were shot with a fully in-view camera crew (sometimes going through multiple takes), bystanders often thought the film was a documentary about Ale (Porton 46). (*Chop Shop*, 2007)

fulfillment.

## Some kind of (neo)realism

Bahrani's early work is so often discussed in relation to various neorealist movements[2] in part due to a broad and historically non-specific affinity with neorealism's perceived social function. The "American Dream" films are easy to dub neorealist because of their aesthetic and formal focus on the "quotidian rhythms" of marginalized individuals' daily lives in the pursuit of dreams rendered "cruelly untenable" in a more grounded socio-economic reality (Scott). The specific question of whether Bahrani's American Dream Trilogy can be situated at the recent end of a lineage tracing back to Italian neorealism, with its heavy postwar influence and often debatable canon, strikes me as unimportant outside the context of a strictly historiographic exercise. Bahrani himself even notes the inconsistency with which neorealism is applied as an aesthetic or generic title to two directors of so-called "Iranian neorealism," Abbas Kiarostami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf, whom he nevertheless acknowledges as important influences (Porton 47). What can be agreed upon, I think, by most who have seen *Man Push Cart*, *Chop Shop*, or *Goodbye Solo* is that these films share certain qualities of aesthetic minimalism, improvisation, and pseudo-documentary connections to the "real world." I want to quickly discuss some of these characteristics as a way of introducing (in addition to the films themselves) certain key structural moves to be discussed later.[3]

Concerned with the experiences of immigrants pursuing their individual versions of the American Dream, Bahrani's characters are played by predominantly non-professional actors whose own lives and experiences often exercise a shaping influence on the story. (Taking a page from one of his Iranian influences, Abbas Kiarostami, many characters share their corresponding actor's real name.) Bahrani often puts his actors into "real" settings in which bystanders don't realize they're in a film—as in the scenes showing Ahmad's daily interactions with customers in *Man Push Cart*, or in *Chop Shop* when the boys try to sell DVDs and candy on the streets and in subway cars. Fernando Canet notes in his discussion of the latter film that Bahrani was so devoted to maintaining the uncertainty of such unstaged scenes that "[he] would avoid saying 'action' or 'cut,' in order to capture spontaneous footage of both the actors and the location. Sometimes even the crew could not distinguish between the script and the improvisations" (163). This intentional blurring of the boundary between documentary and fiction works to pull the "objective" reality of recognizable contemporary spaces into the diegetic narrative, with Bahrani asking "is it documentary or fiction? It doesn't matter. What matters is the basic truthfulness of the premise" (Porton 46). Importantly, people's reactions to the characters are for this reason often genuine, offering an (arguably) more accurate mirror of the subjective reality of the characters and by implication the many individuals for whom they act as narrative stand-ins.

In other instances, Bahrani utilizes the "reality" of a public space by co-opting it entirely, as with the Willets Point repair shop actually run by the character of Rob Sowulski (his real name) in *Chop Shop*. The director even went so far as to have 12-year-old Alejandro Polanco spend six months working in and around Sowulski's shop so that his ostensible knowledge of mechanics, parts, pricing, and lingo would appear genuine on screen, noting that later Willets Point occupants were so familiar with Ale they thought Bahrani and his crew were filming a documentary (Canet 159). Bahrani says that, as with his characters, the locations and ideas for his films often emerge out of his interactions with real places,





Rob Sowulski approached Bahrani about using his actual auto shop in Willets Point to film scenes of Ale working. In *Chop Shop*, he either plays himself or a similar character sharing his real name, though for Bahrani the difference is irrelevant (Porton 47).



"See? Country Club!" Ale proudly exclaims to his sister Isamar, as he shows off the soda-packed refrigerator and microwave in his small makeshift room. (*Chop Shop*, 2007)



The perceived luxury of such amenities underscores how Ale has subversively re-purposed a commercial space—the auto-shop office—for some hard-fought, if temporary, security. (*Chop Shop*, 2007)



Bahrani positions his characters against iconic

noting,

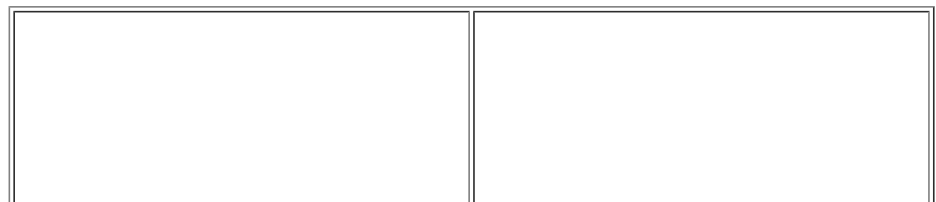
"I usually have the locations before I start writing or while I've started writing. I write while I'm coming back and forth between locations. So the locations become truly integral to how the story is told and how it's being envisioned from the script stage" (Porton 44).

*Chop Shop* continues to be especially useful here for the way it functions as a distinct, fixed intersection of various cultural and commercial flows. While Winston-Salem (and later Blowing Rock) serves as a character in itself in *Goodbye Solo*, the majority of the action takes place inside Solo's roaming cab. And while Ahmad navigates through a web of Manhattan streets in *Man Push Cart*, his exact location of operation varies based on the other odd jobs he's performing. However, while Ale's ventures take him to several different parts of the city as well, he always winds up back at Rob's shop, where an office doubles as his sleeping quarters. Bahrani says he was instantly fascinated with Willets Point when his long-time cinematographer Michael Simmonds brought him there in 2004, remarking, "My God, this place is the world, the world in 20 blocks" (Canet 158).[4]

This mix of careful planning and staging alongside improvisation, uncontrolled environments, and makeshift documentary-style (i.e., handheld) production techniques culminates in an aesthetic Bahrani describes as "complicated although seemingly accidental" (Porton 47). Combined with the drive to capture a degree of "real life" at street level, it is in fact easy enough to make the connection with the films of Rosellini and de Sica, in which "the dramas were found on the streets of a Europe destroyed after the war" (Canet 155). While few would question the ways this "taking the camera to the streets" approach aesthetically recalls Italian neorealism, the social engagement and context seems a sticking point even for Bahrani himself. The director questioned the connection in a 2008 interview, asking,

"What does neorealism even mean in America in 2008? After all, I don't live in wartime, or postwar, Italy... [W]hat is neorealist Iranian cinema? ... And how does one make an Italian neorealist film in Iran or America?" (Porton 47).

He gestures to an answer later in the interview by paraphrasing a review of *Man Push Cart* from *The Village Voice* that claimed, "Bahrani gives us a guy with donuts in a pushcart whereas an Italian neorealist film would have given us the character's social context in a post-9/11 world" (48). I would argue the films do provide this context, if not always overtly. We are reminded of the various characters' social stations not only through the city spaces they inhabit, but also through Bahrani's formal engagement with their daily rhythms and routines and through the repetitive and circular role these routines play in the narratives. Ahmad, Ale, and Solo are always moving before our eyes, but they never come any closer to reaching their (socio-economic) destinations.



markers of U.S. prosperity (here part of the New York skyline), offering distinct visual reminders of their socioeconomic status as outsiders in a post-9/11 U.S. context. (*Man Push Cart*, 2005)



Citi Field looms in the background of many shots in *Chop Shop*, sometimes as a subtle reminder of the economic disparity between Ale's life in Willets Point and the broader prosperity of the city.



Much of *Goodbye Solo* features shots of Solo driving his cab through spaces that exemplify commercial failure and economic despair, from Winston-Salem's housing projects to lifeless industrial districts.

## Repetition and routine

In discussing another of Bahrani's U.S. realist contemporaries—David Gordon Green and his debut feature *George Washington*—Justin Horton provides a useful way to consider the role of mundane repetition and routine in Bahrani's American Dream Trilogy. Horton starts by pointing to Deleuze's discussion of the cinematic shift from the "movement-image" to the "time-image," marked by the emergence of Italian neorealism. Deleuze argued that neorealism was distinguished by a shift away from characters' subjective agency to "move" the narrative forward, becoming "a cinema of the seer and no longer of the agent" (2). This shift marked a key aspect of neorealism: the "incapacitation" of characters, which were contained and rendered immobile in the spaces in which they were observed.

For Deleuze the action-image was characterized by a "sensory-motor image in which [the viewer] took a greater or lesser part by identification with the characters" (3). As the characters exercised some level of control over or against their environment (in turn moving the narrative forward), their subjectivity was rendered sensorily and in part embodied by the viewer. In neorealism's shift to the mode of the time-image, characters cease to become actors in their environments—instead, "[h]e shifts, runs and becomes animated in vain, the situation he is in outstrips his motor capacities on all sides, and makes him see and hear what is no longer subject to the rules of a response or an action" (3). Where the movement-image unfolds in "a setting which is already specified and presupposes an action which discloses it, or prompts a reaction which adapts to or modifies it," the arena of action (or inaction) for the time-image is an "any-space-whatever"—a space not determined by or subject to modification from character agency (5). This lack of direct agency within seemingly indifferent or indeterminate spaces prompts Horton to observe that "[n]eorealism, then, is defined not by its social content but by the incapacitation of its characters" (31).

In Bahrani's films, this incapacitation takes the form of containment and immobility both spatial and social. Ahmad and Solo work and move through the city in enclosures—a small food cart and a cab, respectively. In addition to their entire livelihoods being attached to these vehicles, the vehicles do grant them a degree of movement throughout the urban spaces in which they operate—Solo uses his cab for his and others' transportation, whereas Ahmad's cart (which, without owning a car, he has to push by hand) grants him access to a streetside space of commerce downtown. Within these enclosures the characters can achieve a kind of commercial agency and authority, but even this is limited by the larger socio-economic environment in which they operate. For example, Ahmad's cart affords him some commercial agency—he's saving up to, among other things, get a larger apartment so his son can move back in with him—but only so long as it's anchored and occupied at his specific, licensed spot during predetermined hours. Furthermore, he doesn't own the cart or the license to his location, which he must also buy from another character bit by bit.



Despite being constantly in motion, Solo traverses through spaces in which he has no agency, often surrounded by the kind of indifferent landscapes characterized by Deleuze's "time image." (*Goodbye Solo*, 2008)



It is significant that in all three films the means for each character to attain their dream of financial security and independence is an actual vehicle or vessel of movement, such as Ale and Isamar's food truck. (*Chop Shop*, 2007)



Ahmad's coffee and bagel cart becomes a space of commercial agency and figurative upward mobility when he's anchored in his licensed spot downtown. (*Man Push Cart*, 2005)



But the cart becomes yet another (quite burdensome) vehicle on the street when he's not open for business. (*Man Push Cart*, 2005)

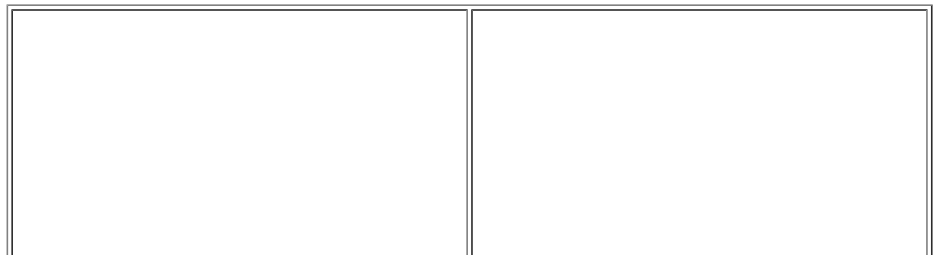


Even when he is not working as a driver, Solo is fixing up a cab that he might one day own and operate on his own—and we see him frequently returning his current vehicle to the garage at the cab service where he works, much like Ahmad's cart. (*Goodbye Solo*, 2008)

Solo's cab affords him mobility but it is also not his own. (He is working to restore another cab to use in the start-up of his own fleet, but this second vehicle must be repaired with the profits he makes from his fares, which in turn he can only collect in accordance with the proper licenses and regulations.) In a sense, Ahmad's cart and Solo's cab act as distinct spaces of individual agency that can be temporarily established (something I want to revisit later) within Deleuze's indifferent any-spaces-whatever. And these spaces *are* indifferent—despite many knowing him by name, Ahmad's Manhattan customers would go to another food cart or coffee shop if he didn't show up one day, and most of Solo's fares could just as easily find another cab.

If Bahrani's characters can claim small, temporary spaces of commercial agency contingent on their surroundings, then moving in and out of these surroundings continually (re)imposes evidence of their own social stratification. Ahmad's customers are overwhelmingly well-dressed, apparently wealthy New Yorkers on their way to high-paying jobs in the high rises looming just outside his cart window. When one of them, a fellow Pakistani named Mohammad, invites him to do some painting and repair work on his (seemingly expensive) 6th Street apartment, it's clear that the bond they formed over shared cultural origins is overshadowed by their distinctly different socio-economic classes. When Mohammad finally recognizes Ahmad as a famous singer from Pakistan—a past that haunts him throughout the film—his first reaction is to excitedly grab his old CD and ask,

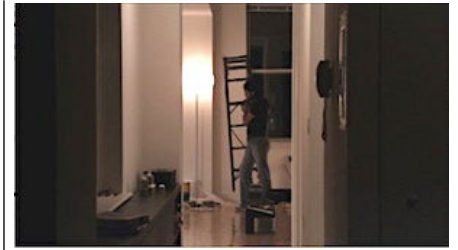
"What the hell are you doing peeling tape off my windows?... If I'd known who you were I wouldn't have asked you up here to paint my apartment."







Despite extending gestures of hospitality and sociability that suggest he views them as equals, Mohammad's actions toward Ahmad consistently emphasize their distinctly different socioeconomic standings. (*Man Push Cart*, 2005)



Even the interior of Mohammad's apartment is coded as a space of social and economic exclusion—an indifferent "any-space-whatever" in which Ahmad has no real agency. Bahrani often places him within several layers of framing, and always performing some kind of service work. (*Man Push Cart*, 2005)

In calling attention to the disparity between Ahmad's previous status in Pakistan and his current status in the United States, Mohammad also subtly reinforces his own socio-economic status over Ahmad, rooted in their respective current orientations to the space of his apartment (owner and service worker). Furthermore, he doesn't stop providing subservient work for Ahmad, who returns to his apartment often to paint, sand and lacquer furniture, and perform other manual labor. Though Mohammad projects an attitude of friendliness and camaraderie—offering Ahmad beers, ordering them Thai food, and offering his couch when Ahmad works late and has a long train ride back to Brooklyn—he maintains a tone of subtle condescension that underscores Ahmad's role within the space as that of a worker. (When Ahmad tries to wash his dishes after they eat, Mohammad says faux-casually "No don't worry about it, I've got someone else to do that.")

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Bahrani positions characters within visual proximity to symbols of success that are just out of reach. Here Ahmad works the coat check (at yet another window) at a music venue, recalling his days as a famous singer in Pakistan. (*Man Push Cart*, 2005)

While Mohammad originally promises to help Ahmad start booking music gigs in New York, extending the easy offer, "Anything you need, don't hesitate to ask," we soon realize the kind of help he's really willing to provide keeps Ahmad moving more sideways than up or forward. He takes him to parties and introduces him to venue owners in the city but never arranges any real meetings. And when Mohammad gets Ahmad a job working the door at a club (keeping his musical dreams firmly in view but still out of reach), this job makes it impossible to run the food cart in the early-morning hours.



Ale and Carlos watch a baseball game being played at nearby Citi Field, but only from a distance somewhere outside of the park. (*Chop Shop*, 2007)



The city looms behind Solo as he walks home after a night of driving, yet another reminder of economic prosperity and exclusion. (*Goodbye Solo*, 2008)

Ahmad's presence in these spaces simply confirms and underscores his own immobility, acting as an extension of his food cart located in the middle of Manhattan. In the same way, nearby markers of prosperity like newly constructed Citi Field—which looms frequently in the background in *Chop Shop*—work to situate Willets Point in a larger socioeconomic context. Like the characters of Bahrani's trilogy, the denizens of Willets Point's auto-focused Iron Triangle district are always working, always in motion, and yet constantly excluded. Canet notes about this situation:

“For Bahrani it was paradoxical to observe how quickly you could migrate from a place of despair to another where you could read on a giant billboard 'Make Dreams Happen.' Bahrani confesses he was curious to know 'what dreams can happen in this place?'... how can the American Dream be so close yet so far away for those who live in Willets Point?” (158)

Ale's traversals through and presence in these city spaces around and beyond Willets Point ensures that the viewer "is constantly aware of the geographical proximity of such socially and culturally distant worlds" (158).

These spaces are characterized not just by immobility but also by repetition, that "hallmark" of neorealist style that puts so much focus on "everyday routine" (Canet 160). In the first 10 minutes of *Man Push Cart*, we are treated to a mostly dialogue-free model of Ahmad's day. He arrives at the garage where his cart is stored and pushes it down empty streets before dawn, picking up supplies on the way; he makes friendly small-talk with customers as he prepares coffee, tea, and bagels; he pulls his cart back to the garage, navigating now-crowded intersections.





Bahrani repeatedly shows Ahmad going through his morning routine: retrieving his food cart from storage and pulling it down pre-dawn streets... (*Man Push Cart*, 2005)



...setting out bagels and muffins before the morning rush in downtown Manhattan. (*Man Push Cart*, 2005)



... An embodied rhythm propels the sequence forward even in the absence of any discernible narrative interest. Bahrani focuses on the tactile elements of Ahmad's routine: tea bags dropping into paper cups, ...



... steaming water splashing down from a tap, ...



... the crinkling of brown paper bags as he hands his customers their bagels or donuts.

Then he makes a long trek back to Brooklyn by subway, carrying his cart's propane tank the whole way; he observes prayers in an apartment we later come to know as his son's current, temporary home; and he's home at 2 a.m. The next day he gets up and does the same thing. Similar routines factor into the structural rhythms of the other films. We see Ale constantly out in front of Rob's shop, asking drivers what they need and guiding them into the garage. The end of each day is marked by Ale's routine of hiding his pay in a coffee can, making microwave popcorn, and going to sleep in his makeshift office apartment (we get important variations on this last routine when his sister Isamar comes to live with him). And even though we hear generally about some of Solo's other fares, we only ever see him repeatedly picking up the same two: William and his friend Roc.



Bahrani pays similar attention to the cyclical and physical nature of work via numerous montages in *Chop Shop*, ...



... which often feature Rob or one of the other adult workers teaching Ale a particular new skill, in turn making him more valuable as a worker within the space.





Rob supervises Ale as he learns to prime car parts for painting, something Ale has asked about eagerly before.



During most of these work scenes, the sound of power tools and screeching metal creates an impersonal cacophony in contrast to the quieter moments he and Isamar share once the work day is done.



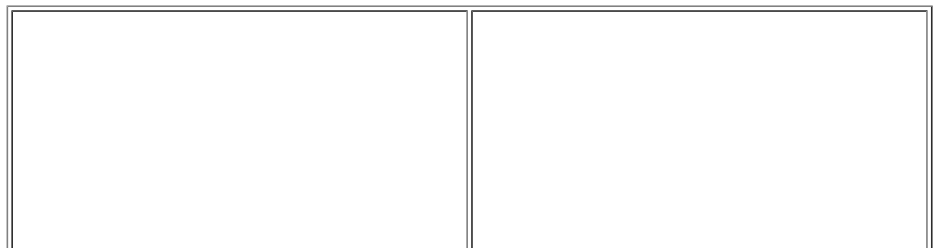
Horton's "mental landscapes:" At the end of his long work day, Ahmad peers through a window at his extended family during prayer, including his young son (behind the curtain on the right). (*Man Push Cart*, 2005)

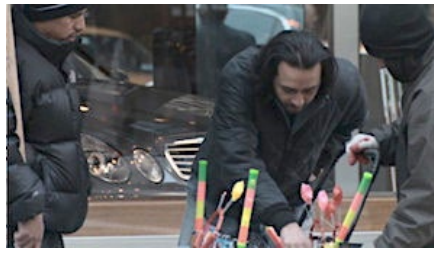


By situating Ahmad's visit as the final part of his nightly routine (after returning the cart and other materials to storage), Bahrani re-contextualizes this cycle as more than just work—but rather as the means through which Ahmad will reunite with his son. (*Man Push Cart*, 2005)

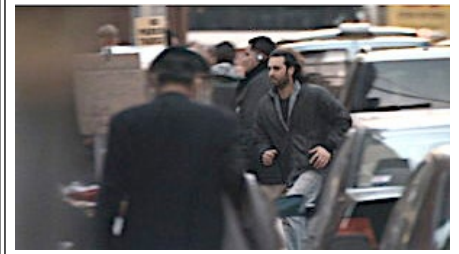
It's important to note that while some of these routines may be altered or shift slightly, they never really change. Even when they're disrupted, the disruption seems like a temporary stop on the way back to the routine. Solo and William fight, but Solo returns to driving him by the film's end. And while this may also be a temporary return, the final scene emphasizes a return to the larger routine governing his life: driving while studying for his flight attendant interview and exam. Ahmad and Ale both encounter serious setbacks to their plans—to buy his own cart and street space and move into a larger apartment with his son, and to restore an old food truck he and his sister can operate, respectively—but these setbacks result in a return to their old routines. At the end of *Man Push Cart*, Ahmad is back in a cart serving coffee and bagels to pre-dawn customers, and *Chop Shop* ends with Ale and his sister waiting out in front of Rob's shop for the day to begin. Ultimately these work routines begin to signify not upward mobility and progress toward some individual or collective "dream," but rather a permanent state: socioeconomic immobility conveyed through repeated movement and often localized in a particular commercial space.

In signifying the immobility and socioeconomic incapacitation of these spaces, the repetition of routine in Bahrani's three films also acts as what Horton calls a "mental landscape." Pursuing the possibilities of a cinematic mode of free indirect discourse, Horton points to Deleuze's discussion of Antonioni, specifically how the director's "framing of the character in relation to the landscape takes on a heightened significance." He argues that in such a mode the landscape seems to be filtered through the character's own subjectivity despite the lack of any POV shots, "as if the film's visual scheme had become colored by the psychological particularities of its characters" (34). The common spaces of Bahrani's films in which the characters repeat various (mostly economic) routines act to fulfill a similar function. More than just signifying the importance of the spaces and their connection to future economic mobility, these repeated routines foreground the larger "dreams" for which the characters are striving. Once we know Ahmad plans to pay off his cart and space to become financially independent, or that Ale is saving up for a food truck that will free him and Isamar to work for themselves, the repetitive scenes of work cease to simply enact tedium and instead recall the character's goals and hopes. In this sense routine and repetition work in the films to mirror each character's subjective states and experiences, as "the filmmaker enters into a mimetic relationship with the character's way of seeing"—a technique Deleuze and Horton position as "a profoundly social act" (35). I would argue political as well.





In a surprising break from routine late in the film, Ahmad leaves his cart on the street to go buy his son a toy from a sidewalk vendor, once again extending his endless cycle of work to include hopes of future connection with his son. (*Man Push Cart*, 2005)



Hope turning to panic as Ahmad realizes the cart is gone upon his return, the chaos of the city streets now engulfing him and acting as a spatial representation of his own mental state (as opposed to earlier scenes in which he pulls his cart along behind him and is thus visually distinct from the crowded mass).



Horton's "mental landscapes" are enacted in the continuously revisited spaces as well. The constant reminder of Citi Field in the background acts as an external symbol of Ale's exclusion from the various promises of the "American Dream"—manifesting a prosperity and security that seems always just barely out of reach. (*Chop Shop*, 2007)



The piles of scrapped parts in Ahmad's garage, and consistently in the background of many of the film's Willets Point locations, emphasize refuse—pieces of a whole forgotten and neglected. (*Chop Shop*, 2007)

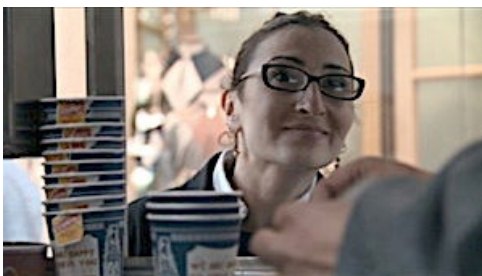
Sara Ahmed helps us consider this repetition of routine as more than just a formal enacting of character subjectivity, but also an embodied extension of the characters' othered selves into space in order to create familiarity. She notes,

“The work of inhabitation involves orientation... ways of extending bodies into spaces that create new folds, or new contours... If orientation is about making the strange familiar through the extension of bodies into space, then disorientation occurs when that extension fails.”

It's relevant to note that Bahrani's characters aren't so much disoriented as they are closed off from the opportunity to more permanently “extend” themselves into new socioeconomic spaces and develop some familiarity via commercial success—per Ahmed “we could say that some spaces extend certain bodies and simply do not leave room for others” (11). Ahmad, Ale, and Solo are not granted the “room” within capitalist spaces that they aspire to occupy, and must find ways of moving through and within such spaces on their own terms.

## Making do

So Bahrani's characters do have some agency and capability of movement, but it would seem only when contained in the capitalist spaces and vehicles that keep



"Strategies" of commerce: Ahmad's cart (temporarily) delimits a space of agency in which he interacts with customers confidently and decisively, positioned over them with authority and engaging with a familiarity and rapport that suggests many of the people stopping at his cart are used to seeing him every day. (*Man Push Cart*, 2005)



When William tries to cut Solo out of his life, it is through the space of his cab and his role in transporting William that Solo re-establishes his own agency. Picking William up from his common trip to the theater despite not having been called, Solo reminds him, "I'm your driver." (*Goodbye Solo*, 2008)



Ale's makeshift apartment inside the auto shop's office is a kind of "strategic" action as well, delimiting a place to call his own not for commercial agency, but as a subversive response to a system that would otherwise see him and Isamar homeless. (*Chop Shop*, 2007)



Ahmad barter for cigarettes with a familiar magazine stand vendor, offering him discounted

them ultimately socially immobile. I want to turn to de Certeau's notion of "making do" as a helpful way of understanding and reframing some of their actions within these spaces. De Certeau introduces the notion of "making do" as a subversive practice enabling one to operate both within and counter to the dominant social structures and the prescriptions and restrictions they impose. Here he is referring to "ways of operating" that open up new possibilities for action for the subject:

"Without leaving the place where he has no choice but to live and which lays down its law for him, he establishes within it a degree of *plurality* and creativity" (30, emphasis in original).

This "plurality and creativity" is enabled in part by the subversive "uses" one finds for products and processes imposed by the dominant social order, but de Certeau is careful to clarify that this range of possible subversive actions is subject to "*power relationships* [that] define the networks in which they are inscribed and [that] delimit the circumstances from which they can profit" (34). He characterizes two modes of action—strategies and tactics—which are contingent on the actor and their relation to the spaces in which action are taken, and which can help describe the various movements of Bahrani's characters as they extend themselves into Ahmed's otherwise foreclosed spaces.

A strategy, according to de Certeau, involves a subject enacting power through the establishment of "a *place* that can be delimited as its *own* and serve as the base from which relations with an *exteriority* composed of targets or threats (customers or competitors, enemies, the country surrounding the city, objectives and objects of research, etc.) can be managed" (36, emphasis in original). This claiming of one's own space enables the subject to inscribe power relations within it, establishing agency within or against the larger (in Bahrani's case socio-economic) orders. De Certeau continues,

"every 'strategic' rationalization seeks first of all to distinguish its 'own' place, that is, the place of its own power and will, from an 'environment'... it is an effort to delimit one's own place in a world bewitched by the invisible powers of the Other" (36).

On one hand, the economic plights of Ahmad, Ale, and Solo can be ascribed to their role as "Others" excluded from and neglected by the economic strategies of post-9/11 U.S. capitalism. In claiming their own spaces of commercial agency, however temporary or regulated, they are striving to distinguish their own "place[s] of power and will," and in this context it is even more significant that all three characters are working toward purchasing vehicles that truly are their own, rather than operating out of spaces owned by others.

While strategy entails one carving out a space and thereby partaking in recognized operations within the larger social order, de Certeau uses the term "tactics" to describe actions taken outside of one's own autonomous space. Particularly important when considering Bahrani's characters,

"The space of a tactic is the space of the other... it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power" (37).

By characterizing Ahmad, Ale, and Solo's operations in this way I don't mean to imply that the viewer should consider them "others" in a foreign land, but rather that they are already defined as cultural and socio-economic others in the terms of late U.S. capitalism. When they find ways to exert commercial agency outside of their licensed and prescribed enclosures—or when they utilize those enclosures in quasi-legal or unapproved ways—we can consider them as engaging in tactical action(s). This is evident when Ahmad sells pirated DVDs to passersby or barter them for cigarettes with local convenience store and newsstand attendants (who



copies of pirated DVDs rather than the sanctioned form of cash payment in act of tactical subversion. (*Man Push Cart*, 2005)

all make it seem like this is a well-established, long-standing agreement). The same goes for scenes in which Ale steals hubcaps or phones and tries to sell them to the operator of a local chop shop (played by the same actor that plays Ahmad in *Man Push Cart*).

De Certeau notes that while strategy is rooted in a place, tactics are mobile, enacted outside of claimed spaces, or at least outside spaces claimed as the practitioners' own. Tactics are then tied to continual movement through these strategic spaces, as we see Bahrani's characters "making use of the elements of the [urban] terrain" they traverse during and between their economic routines (34).



Ale negotiates with a local chop shop owner about the price for a set of stolen hubcaps, using the general language and practices of capitalism outside of sanctioned capitalist spaces and rules to turn a profit. (*Chop Shop*, 2007)



Language as tactical action: Ale and Carlos deliver a rehearsed and rhetorically calculated speech to sell candy to subway riders—turning the enclosed, ostensibly neutral transitional space of the train car into a space of commerce from which they alone can benefit. (*Chop Shop*, 2007)



Ale consistently uses the language and rituals of capitalism, as when he sells candy and DVDs at discounted rates of "one for \$5 or two for \$8." (*Chop Shop*, 2007)

De Certeau characterizes these movements in terms of the dominant systems through which subversive subjects pass and operate, arguing that "while these 'traverses' remain heterogenous to the systems they infiltrate," acting subjects "use as their *material* the *vocabularies* of established languages... [and] remain within the framework of prescribed *syntaxes* (the temporal modes of schedules, paradigmatic organizations of places, etc.)" (34, emphasis in original). We can see both of these techniques utilized by Bahrani's characters. When Ale and his friend Carlos board the subway to sell candy to riders, Ale delivers a well-rehearsed, rhetorically calculated speech, leveraging their status as kids to their advantage when he addresses the car:

"Excuse me ladies and gentlemen, pardon the interruption... We are not going to lie to you, we are not here selling candy for no school basketball team. In fact, I don't even go to school, and if you want me back in school today I got candy for you."

His sudden transformation of the subway car into a commercial space to be marketed to (and the creation of a marketable story inflected with pathos) indicates an understanding of capitalist language and methodology even as he subverts regulations of capitalist activity. Solo's use of his cab could also be seen as "remain[ing] within the framework of prescribed *syntaxes*," or the formal rules of his profession, reliably driving passengers where they ask him to go. Yet the only passengers we actually ever see in the film are two addicts lighting up a crack pipe, his friend Roc who he ferries to several implied drug deals across town, and William, who's hired Solo to drive him to a suicide attempt at Blowing Rock. Solo operates within the prescribed rules and patterns of his profession, enabling others to utilize approved systems of transit to carry out unsanctioned (and in Roc's case, commercially lucrative) activities.

## Ghostly trajectories and non-places

Part of the whole reason these movements can be subversive for de Certeau is that they reinscribe choice and opportunity into spaces where the intended use is



Solo tactically subverts the rules of capitalism by giving rides to his "preferred customers" Roc and William off the books—specifically, using the cab



he drives for a large taxi service to ferry his friend Roc to and from various drug deals across Winston-Salem, thus making a regulated mode of commercial transportation complicit in profitable illegal activities. (*Goodbye Solo*, 2008)



Weaving trajectories through non-places: Solo continuously charts trajectories between spaces of commerce such as gas stations, banks, food and liquor stores, and hotels. (*Goodbye Solo*, 2008)

(supposed to be) limited and predetermined. He resists his own initial term for discussing such movement, "trajectory," for the specific reason that it implies not a series of contingent actions and encounters but a "flattening out" of opportunity—time transformed into charted space, and in the process the loss of the tactic's potential for a "clever *utilization of time*, of the opportunities it presents and also of the play that it introduces into the foundations of power" (39). Thus, charting movement through established systems converts the various possible points of encounter—points that could be claimed and resignified through subversive "uses" by those the system is not designed to serve—to mere transitory points emptied of potential or meaning.

In this context the various trajectories Bahrani's characters chart through city streets and subways would lose their potential for meaningful subversion—their routine, repeated movements frozen in time, never leading to Ahmad's own cart and space, to Ale's food truck, or to a better, more fulfilling job as a flight attendant for Solo. And indeed this is, narratively, how the films end—with no forward progress toward each character's "dream" or upward mobility to show for their toiling. As de Certeau describes, these

"[u]nrecognized producers, poets of their own affairs, trailblazers in the jungles of functionalist rationality... trace 'indeterminate trajectories' that are apparently meaningless, since they do not cohere with the constructed, written, and prefabricated space through which they move" (34).



In their movements through the city, Bahrani's characters often repurpose and engage with non-places in ways that resignify them in terms of capitalism's failings, ...



... such as when Ale uses an abandoned roadside structure to store his stock of pirated DVDs and his cash savings concealed in a coffee can (an image broadly recalling the Great Depression). (*Chop Shop*, 2007)



... Or when Ale and Carlos toss a shopping cart off a concrete embankment...



... revealing a pile of shopping carts below—the displaced markers of commercial agency and food security having converted this generic non-place by the highway into a symbol of neglect and displacement. (*Chop Shop*, 2007)



De Certeau's phenomenon of "flattening out" has echoes in Marc Augé's notion of "non-places," which he characterizes as a distinct and increasingly prominent feature of postmodern urbanization. Of non-places, Augé says:

"If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or

Bahrani first allows Ale and Carlos to blend in with the anonymous crowd waiting for the train, emphasizing the ahistorical neutrality of the subway (as Auge's "non-place"). (*Chop Shop*, 2007) ...



... But once they are inside preparing to address riders with their sales pitch, Bahrani focuses exclusively on the two boys, emphasizing their occupation of the space as well as their orientation against other passengers within it. ...



... In commanding the subway car's attention with the goal of selling something, the kids act as manifest evidence of capitalism's neglect (and in turn reinscribe a historical reminder of this failure into an ostensibly ahistorical, neutral place). (*Chop Shop*, 2007)



Ahmad in a strikingly Sisyphean image: The Toys 'R Us sign positioned above Ahmad in the background acting as a signifier of his young son (who he hasn't seen in over 2 months), while he holds his cart's propane tank, which he must carry constantly to and from work every day. (*Man Push Cart*, 2005)

historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place... [Non-places] are not themselves anthropological places and... do not integrate the earlier places: instead these are listed, classified, promoted to the status of 'places of memory,' and assigned to a circumscribed and specific position." (63)

It is significant to note that one of the main types of non-places Auge points to as "proliferating" under postmodernity, non-places of transit, comprise the primary trajectories woven through Bahrani's (and really all) urban spaces. If we consider that the characters in Bahrani's films deploy de Certeau's "tactics" not in distinct cultural/socio-economic spaces with delineated power relations and boundaries, but rather in "non-places" intended to facilitate flow between the various other "strategic" spaces of capitalism, then we can see how they begin to reclaim the potential for meaningful subversion.

In explaining the "unrecognized" status of his subversive subjects and their "apparently meaningless" trajectories, de Certeau points to how difficult it is to account for the behaviors and subversive practices of those "making do." He attributes this in part to the fact that the usual tools for analyzing "the systems they infiltrate" are concerned only with consumption and accumulation: "[w]hat is counted is *what* is used, not the *ways* of using" (35). Yet these "ways" of using and operating within dominant systems, while perhaps invisible on a larger, structural level, still leave noticeable traces. To this end, de Certeau declares, "[t]he practices of consumption are the ghosts of the society that carries their name," and for Bahrani's characters these "ghostly" movements become subversive in the way they enable each to claim and subjectively delimit various "non-places," however temporarily (35). It's relevant here to think about how the presence of other/Othered bodies disrupts the familiarity and neutrality of the spaces in which Bahrani's characters operate. More than just acts of agency, their presence(s) work to resignify the non-places they traverse by manifesting the very Otherness the strategic spaces of capitalism work to exclude. Auge notes that the non-place:

"never exists in pure form; places reconstitute themselves in it; relations are restored and resumed in it... Place and non-place are rather like opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed; they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten." (64)

If, as Sara Ahmed notes, "space is dependent on bodily inhabitation," then for Bahrani's characters, inhabitation in these non-places works to create a temporary sense of familiarity and belonging. More than just theoretically subversive (and privileged) "play," as de Certeau suggests, we may read their repeated routines and "tactical" operations as traces of history showing through the ahistorical, identity-free veneer of the transitional spaces in which they operate. By operating as commercial actors within and through existing "trajectories" of transit, the characters not only serve as "ghostly" traces and reminders of the capitalist systems and economic structures that routinely exclude them, but also—in serving narrative purposes for Bahrani—they resignify these non-places as anthropological spaces of heightened contemporary significance.

## Conclusion

While the tendency to discuss Bahrani's films in terms of an as-yet-undefined mode of contemporary U.S. realism can be productive (as I hope the above discussion has been here), it is worth further considering how the American Dream Trilogy incorporates and modifies existing notions of realism. Specifically, the realism here is rooted in more than just aesthetics (the guerilla-style documentary feel) or narrative (mirroring social reality and/or Deleuze's neorealist incapacitation). While Deleuze argues that neorealism's protagonists



Straining against the wind at the top of Blowing Rock, the downward motion of William's (possible) decision to jump is implied at the same time the wind blows upward against Solo. (*Goodbye Solo*, 2008)



Ale breaks down the food truck through which he planned to realize his dream of financial independence for him and Isamar, laboriously carrying the different pieces into the surrounding scrap piles. (*Chop Shop*, 2007)

were essentially powerless objects of their circumstances and surroundings, Bahrani's characters never stop being anything but fully autonomous subjects—agents who continue propelling their own narratives. Bahrani's decision to evoke the myth of Sisyphus in relation to the characters' narrative arcs is significant in how it reveals a particular understanding of this agency: Ahmad, Ale, and Solo's socioeconomic incapacitation is less about a lack of possibility for action in adapting or influencing the spaces through which they move, and more about the limited spaces to which they've been confined by post-9/11 U.S. social and economic systems.

The films occupy a unique space in the field of socially engaged contemporary U.S. cinema. They offer neither the affirmative (and escapist) triumph of rags-to-riches tales or the social posturing and self-importance of award-baiting prestige films—the latter of which often risk falling into a trope of "misery" narratives in which characters suffer for the audience's own sense of edification. Part of the reason for avoiding these two polar-opposite articulations of similar narratives in fact lies in Bahrani's insistence that his characters maintain their agency, even if this agency is not ultimately confirmed to be either fruitful or futile. Regarding the role of endings in his films, Bahrani points out that

"moral endings aren't true to life since life has no intrinsic morality. If you look at Persian poetry, it has an acceptance of life as it is. That's disturbing to most American viewers" (Porton 46).

This "disturbing" refusal to resolve the characters' Sisyphean struggles—and instead to emphasize the cyclical nature of these struggles as the dominant structures of their respective lives—is perhaps the key feature to Bahrani's particular mode of socially engaged realism.

The American Dream is in certain ways very much "alive" for the characters of *Man Push Cart*, *Chop Shop*, and *Goodbye Solo*, but it is re-coded for audiences as a motivation and engine of constant movement rather than an actual, attainable goal. Bahrani offers an aesthetically and formally mimetic reflection of the mental subjectivities and experiences of marginalized characters. However, he situates these experiences against the larger ideological systems and structures that both motivate the characters and limit their place in contemporary society. The operative mode of the films may in this way be more of an ideological realism, manifesting the tropes of work-oriented forward motion in dominant U.S. "bootstrap" narratives in order to resignify them, substituting a disturbing "acceptance of life as it is" for traditional markers of success and prosperity. Much like Bahrani's characters, then, the films historicize and make visible the various failings and exclusions of capitalism, and in doing so they work to reconfigure the language and narrative elements of the "American Dream" mythos.

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### Notes

1. Chief among these voices was *New York Times* critic A.O. Scott, who in his 2009 article "Neo-Neorealism" pointed to a contemporary resurgence of neorealist sensibilities in a handful of films from young independent directors touring the recent festival circuits, which he argued embraced the "possib[ility] that engagement with the world as it is might reassert itself as an aesthetic strategy." Drawing connections between the poor and disenfranchised postwar characters of Italian neorealism and the contemporary United States' post-9/11 cultural and economic climate, Scott praised these films for "offer[ing] not only bracing, poetic views of real life but also tantalizing glimpses of a cinematic tradition that might have been," enthusiastically declaring that "American film is having its Neorealist moment, and not a moment too soon." (In this group of films he specifically names Bahrani's first three U.S. features—dubbed his "American Dream Trilogy"—as well as Kelly Reichardt's *Wendy and Lucy*, Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck's *Sugar*, So Yong Kim's *Treeless Mountain*, and Lance Hammer's *Ballast*.) [[return to page 1](#)]

2. Typically traditional Italian neorealism and Iranian neorealism, as well as other more general "realist" movements and aesthetics. (For more, see A.O. Scott's contested "Neo-Neo Realism," Richard Brody's near-immediate, strangely incensed response in *The New Yorker* (<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/about-neo-neo-realism>), Canet, and Horton, referenced in this essay.)

3. While as of this writing Bahrani has completed three more films—*At Any Price*, *99 Homes*, and *Fahrenheit 451*—these more recent efforts have moved in slightly different directions in terms of aesthetics and production mode, and I will be referring exclusively to the first three films mentioned above for the entirety of this essay.

4. Bahrani's enthusiasm for the diversity and contained chaos of Willets Point echoes his his affinity for the "complexity and energy" of Tehran—where he lived for several years after graduating from Columbia University—and the way so many people and flows are funneled into urban centers and forced to interact (Scott).

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Rob Riggle foregrounds his military background in the “Marines in Berkeley” episode of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*.



An interviewee describes his feelings about the Marines recruitment office in Berkeley as being similar to how “the Iraqis felt being occupied.”

## “Alpha male, veteran journalist” Rob Riggle’s traumatic embodiment and satiric authenticity

by [Anna Froula](#)

In March 2008, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart (TDSWJS)* sent its veteran reporter Rob Riggle undercover to get the scoop on what he calls “the Marines’ toughest fight yet,” i.e., the protests against a recruitment office in Berkeley, CA. [1] [\[open notes in new window\]](#) The segment’s introduction makes Riggle’s veteran status explicit by displaying a picture of himself in Marine fatigues before he dons his hippie disguise. Here, he satirizes the lack of knowledge about the ground truth of war, exemplified in one protester’s statement that he “kinda felt like probably the Iraqis felt being occupied here in Berkeley.” Riggle’s sarcastic voiceover mockingly affirms this view by juxtaposing shots of people enjoying the beautiful weather in Berkeley against the rubble and explosions of the Baghdad warzone.

When another interviewee complains that the Marines “are recruiting people for mass murder,” Riggle’s reaction shots invoke the trope of the enraged veteran with a twitchy eye and grimace that culminate in him excusing himself—twice—to karate kick boards in two while screaming, “HIPPIES!” and to throw himself through a wall. His coverage of Code Pink protesters “hugging for a peaceful world” includes an interview with a young member who explains that free speech must be protected. When Riggle interrupts by musing ironically, “If only there was an organization sworn to defend that free speech,” she beams at him and agrees. While a few of his other *TDSWJS* colleagues have performed this loudmouth, alpha male role persona while exposing social foibles and hypocrisies, Riggle’s status of Marine Reserve during this segment sharpens its satirical edge.



An angry Riggle kicks a board in two after his interviewee describes Marine recruitment as being for “mass murder.”



An incensed Riggle throws himself through a wall.

Riggle’s 2006–2008 tenure on *TDSWJS* solidified his often physically threatening persona for the show’s viewership.[2] While Riggle has continued to make occasional appearances on the show since his departure in 2008, his regular role coincided with a period in which the George W. Bush administration’s decision to





The Daily Show with Jon Stewart juxtaposes images of Iraq with images of Berkeley.



Berkeley's similarities with a combat zone.



Riggle in his hippie disguise.



Members of Code Pink hug for a peaceful world.

invade and occupy Iraq by military force was widely viewed as strategically unwise at best and intentionally misleading at worst. The satiric news program often traded on Riggle's experience in combat zones to sharpen the show's satirical criticism of the military occupations in the Middle East. Furthermore, his tenure on the show also shared a cultural moment when portrayals of traumatized war veterans were ubiquitous in television and film.[3] Riggle's performances within this time frame tended not just to criticize the war's architects, a recurring theme on *TDSWJS*, but also, as exemplified by the "Marines in Berkley" segment, to target leftist protest strategies that directed anger toward service personnel rather than the architects of war.

Today Rob Riggle is a familiar face in TV sitcoms, comedic films, and FOX NFL, Dos Equis, and KFC commercials, working steadily with over 100 acting credits to his name. The retired Marine Lieutenant Colonel launched his television career on *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) after his return from Afghanistan in 2004 as a comic persona that is often deeply embedded in the traumatic stereotype of the returning veteran. Some of his performances implicitly draw from his military background—e.g., his President of the Navy in the parodic show about cops fighting terrorism in San Diego, *NTSF:SD:SUV* (Cartoon Network, 2011-2013); Lt. John McClellan in *Funny or Die's The Navy SEAL Who Killed Osama bin Laden* (Nick Corirossi and Charles Ingram, 2011); and, most recently, his Lt. Colonel Max Bowers in 2018's *12 Strong* (Nicoli Fuglsig).[4] However, his role as a satiric journalist on *TDSWJS* explicitly invoked his military authority in that program's emphatic critique of the Bush administration's rhetoric about the military occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan. What is especially significant about the public persona known as "Rob Riggle" is not simply that it satirizes certain representations of and rationalizations about war but that it combines both the comic and tragic edges of the war veteran persona into a single figure who means more precisely because he has been *over there*.

Riggle primarily served as a Public Information Officer (PIO), or the public relations' face of the Marines to the press and politicians. PIOs bear the reputation of being preppy outliers among combat-experienced veterans; even so, his service in dangerous and unpredictable war zones marks him as a rarity in the contemporary entertainment industry. This essay maintains that his military history offers a critical set of readings of the characters he plays and that the intertextuality among his roles and war experience specifically provides a double-edged commentary on interpretations of the "war on terror," its veterans, and the ways in which they experience trauma and moral injury—or the stereotype of being traumatized.[5] His military history adds a metatextual layer of authority to his satiric perspectives on war but also makes his portrayals of traumatized veterans significant even if they do not draw on actual experience.

As a successful actor, Riggle has been a significant figure in making the veteran visible in a nation in which 1% of U.S. citizens serve in combat zones. Ultimately, this essay analyzes the ways in which his multiple roles, from roughly 2006-2010, often trafficked in troubling stereotypes of the veteran to bring visibility to the kinds of invisible suffering war veterans can experience. His stock character of the loud alpha male can be read as bearing parodic signifiers of policies, practices, and results of the "war on terror" and its legacies, such as torture, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and "stop loss"—a policy that extends a service member's active duty service involuntarily. This persona thus interrogates the gap between claims to "support the troops" and actual material conditions experienced by the military in the Bush years of the "war on terror." Thus his performances might touch on the 2004 revelations of U.S. torture at Abu Graib prison in Iraq, the deplorable conditions at Walter Reed Army Medical Center—which came under fire in 2007 after reports of neglected patients and vermin-infested living



A Code Pink member explains that free speech must be protected.



Riggle ponders the existence of an institution designed to protect free speech.



Riggle's President of the Navy on Cartoon Network's *NTSF:SD:SUV.*

conditions—or lack of body armor needed for protection from Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) in the early stages of military operations in Iraq.

Critics of the Iraq War often pointed to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's 2004 response to a soldier who highlighted the problem of the lack of proper armor during the invasion and early days of the occupation. Confronting the politician, the soldier explained, "We're digging pieces of rusted scrap metal and compromised ballistic glass that has already been shot up, dropped, busted—picking the best out of this scrap to put on our vehicles go into combat. We do not have proper armament vehicles to carry with us North." Rumsfeld responded, "As you know, you go to war with the army you have, not the army you might want or wish to have at a later time," a statement which was roundly denounced as flippant and even insulting to men and women in uniform.[6]

In what follows, I first offer a short history of Riggle's military career and entrance into comedy. I then examine his satiric critiques of the Bush administration and Congressional handling of the torture scandal and treatment of military personnel on *TDSWJS*. Next I discuss his *TDSWJS* segments broadcast from his 2007 USO tour to Iraq. I contextualize his satiric personas with some of his belligerent supporting roles in films around the same time period. Finally, I discuss the ways that Riggle made the struggles of the returning veteran legible in the TV sitcom *Gary Unmarried* (CBS, 2008-2010), albeit in a contained sitcom format that raised important issues only to punctuate them with a laugh track. These texts are fairly ephemeral, especially ten years later, but excavating his persona from them allows for an important snapshot of how U.S. culture mediates portrayals of its veterans within its longest wars. Riggle's varied roles that trade on his military experience offer multiple versions of veteran narratives, military masculinities, and military bearings. In short, he performs as a veteran narrative multiverse.

## A brief history

Though Riggle claims to keep his two worlds of comedy and military separate, his entrance into both coincided from the start. Voted "Most Humorous" in high school, the theater and film major at the University of Kansas enlisted in the Marine Corps, in part, because his path of study, as he told Marc Maron in a 2011 interview, "meant I was going to be a waiter." [7] Yet having been bullied until he hit puberty in the tenth grade, he also admits that he was drawn to the Corps as a masculine proving ground: "There's also something in the male psyche about that question, 'can I hack it? Can I do it? What would I do in that situation?'" [8] In 1990 Riggle attended Officer Training School and was poised to earn his pilot's wings, but he realized that doing so would further delay his dreams of a second career in comedy. Instead, he completed Defense Information School and was deployed to Liberia, then Kosovo. [9] In total, he received several awards for serving in the Marines for twenty-three years: nine years of active duty and fourteen more in the reserves.



Riggle as Lt. John McClellan on *Funny or Die's The Navy SEAL Who Killed Osama bin Laden*.



Riggle as his former commander in Afghanistan, Lt. Colonel Max Bowers, in *12 Strong* (Warner Bros., 2018).





Riggle trained in improv in the comedy troupe Respecto Montalban while serving as the Marines' Deputy Director of Public Affairs in New York City.



Riggle poses as a member of the press in an episode of *Saturday Night Live*.



Riggle's Randy throws his fists and yells "POW!" at Will Ferrell's Brennan Huff in *Stepbrothers* (Columbia Pictures, 2008).

Riggle moved to New York City, serving as the Marine's Deputy Director of Public Affairs and studying method acting and working with the improv comedy troupes Respecto Montalban and Upright Citizens' Brigade in his spare time. In 2000, Riggle left active Marine duty and joined the Reserves. On September 11, 2001, however, the Corps activated his unit, and he spent the next week on search-and-rescue duty at the World Trade Center with the "Bucket Brigades," sifting through the rubble with his hands for a week. He then volunteered for active duty and was deployed to Afghanistan, as he explained to Maron, "taking out the Taliban, taking out al-Qaeda." [10] It was there he served under Lt. Colonel Max Bowers, whom he would eventually play in 2017's *12 Strong* (Nicolai Fulgsig).



Riggle considered training to become a pilot for the Marines in the 90s.



In the wake of September 11, 2001, Riggle served in the rubble of the World Trade Center.

When Riggle returned to the United States in 2002, he also returned to the Upright Citizens' Brigade and in 2004 joined the cast of *Saturday Night Live* (NBC, 1975- ) for a year. After *SNL* released him, purportedly because it did not know what to do with his "tall, vaguely menacing, but ultimately hilarious Superman/soldier hybrid," he moved to Los Angeles to shop scripts and auditioned for *TDSWJS*, which would raise his comedic profile and give him a coast-to-coast commute. [11] In 2013 Riggle retired from the Marine Corps Reserve, and he has worked steadily, garnering support roles in film and television. More recently, We Are the Mighty, a media brand run by military personnel and veterans, named Riggle as one of its "Veterans to Watch in 2017," citing his advocacy work for veterans. [12]

At 6'3", 235, Riggle has playfully acknowledged that he has been typecast as a "bigger white funny yelling guy." A broad sampling of his early fictional roles include a thundering gang leader in a satire of America's post-9/11 domestic paranoia of Muslims in the comedy *Terrorists* (Jay Martel, 2004), a raging, corporate bully who punctuates threats by shouting, "POW!" on *Step Brothers* (Adam McKay, 2008); a cop who torments Will Ferrell's police-officer accountant into firing his weapon in the office via a "desk pop" in *The Other Guys* (Adam McKay, 2010), and an R. Lee Erney-styled demon drill sergeant at Fort Hell on *Ugly Americans* (David M. Stern and Devin Clark, 2010-2012), to name a few. Riggle has been working steadily; more recently, his career has moved into sports comedy, with his weekly "Riggle's Picks" that showcase a skit featuring him playfully mocking a team on FOX's NFL, and drama with his roles in *Big Miracle* (Ken Kwapis, 2012) and *12 Strong*. [14]





As “Alpha Reporter” on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Riggle is “forged in the fires of war.”



Riggle screams at his recruits as a drill sergeant in the “GI Twayne” episode of *Ugly Americans* (Comedy Central, 2010-2012).



Riggle conducts a “Singalong Sideline” as one of his Riggle’s Pics on Fox NFL Sunday.

## “One reporter that destroys the competition”

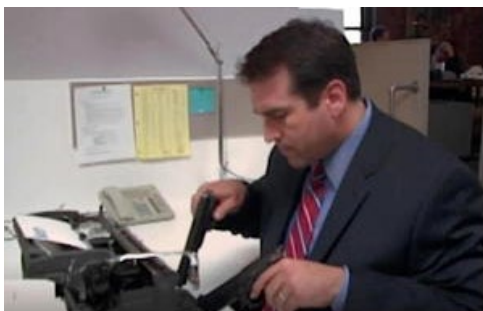
While *TDSWJS* frequently labels its correspondents with mock distinguished expert titles to satirize corporate news’ claims to its guests’ expertise, Riggle’s Senior Military Analyst added critical depth to the show’s analysis of how the Bush administration—and its supporters—propagandized the military occupations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Riggle’s performances subverted the logic of the “war on terror”—such as when he clearly calls Bush a “motherfucker,” despite being bleeped out, for diverting resources from the war in Afghanistan into an unnecessary invasion of Iraq. For anti-war viewers long frustrated with the Bush administration’s “Support the Troops” platitudes and handling of Iraq and its impact on U.S. service personnel and their families, many viewers took pleasure in seeing a veteran and Reserve Marine refusing to be a political prop and calling out the Commander in Chief.



Riggle crawls military style with a microphone bayonet.



Riggle looms over Brian William after forcing him to pay the satiric reporter compliments.



Riggle types with guns before accidentally firing one.



Riggle punches fellow *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* reporter Aasif Mandvi.



Riggle sprays from his “freakishly large musk glands.”

Riggle’s faux journalist also exploited his physically threatening persona. In “The News Better Run,” a 2008 segment featuring this “alpha reporter,” a voiceover intones, “Forged in the fires of war, he’s one reporter who destroys the



Jon Stewart highlights contradictions in Congressional policies of “supporting the troops” on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*.



Stewart points out that military recruitment explicitly advertises that the military will pay for college for service personnel.



Riggle brandishes a Burger King mug, a symbol of dubious victory in Iraq.

competition.”[15] The montage of short scenes that follows features Riggle hurling a TV, which is playing a Wolf Blitzer segment, from the roof of a building; crawling military-style under a series of Obama and McCain campaign signs while carrying a microphone bayonet between his teeth; looming sinisterly over Brian Williams after the NBC anchor reports, “Rob Riggle is one of the finest reporters I’ve ever met”; flexing to show off his “freakishly large musk glands”; punching fellow *TDSWJS* correspondent Aasif Mandvi—whose “Senior Muslim Correspondent” persona plays on his Indian and Muslim identities—in the face; and typing with two pistols (and accidentally firing one). The image of Riggle crawling through the trenches of the 2008 election posits politics as warfare and suggests that combat prepares mock reporters for the culture war that plays out in U.S. political discourse. Yet, this segment also invokes the traumatized veteran trope of uncontrollable rage—against Blitzer and a cowering Williams.

Riggle also deployed his military experience against political figureheads playing politics with the GI Bill. In this segment, entitled “C\*A\*S\*H,” Stewart juxtaposes clips of politicians and pundits—John McCain, Dick Cheney, Tony Snow, Lindsay Graham, Judd Gregg, and George W. Bush—“support[ing] the troops” with a list of the military issues that directly contradict their claims, including the lack of body armor and funding to treat PTSD, Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and other mental disorders.[16] Stewart then outlines Senator Jim Webb’s proposed bill to offer recruits tuition “at the best public college in [their] state[s]” for three years of service. After footage of McCain alleging that Webb’s bill would ultimately harm the military if funded, Stewart shows a montage of military recruitment advertisements depicting the military as, in his words, a “fast track to college.”[17] Then, against images of a science fiction-inspired Marine recruitment commercial portraying a Marine sword-fighting a fire monster, Stewart rhetorically asks if such combat fantasies motivate Marines to enlist. Riggle interrupts via phone call, explaining that he indeed joined the Marines “because I thought I was gonna fight a fire monster. I didn’t know they could fake that shit with computers!” His adoption of the dumb grunt stereotype for laughs nonetheless underscores the cynicism of politicians who deploy “support the troops” rhetoric but actively work to limit the support these troops receive for service rendered.

In particular, the segment contrasts McCain, the late Vietnam veteran and Arizona Senator who famously spent five years as a Prisoner of War in the notorious Hanoi Hilton, with fellow Vietnam veteran Webb and his revised, more generous GI Bill. While this high-profile veteran stand-off invites chuckles, it further highlights the complexities of veteran representation. We see this particularly in a former POW running for the position of Commander in Chief at the time while attempting to reconcile *not* supporting veterans of the current wars and their educational goals; McCain argued that the bill would disincentivize service members from becoming noncommissioned officers, whom he envisioned as “the backbone of all the services.”[18]

Under the aegis of satire, Riggle also questioned the chain of command up to the President himself for sending his fellow service members into war over false claims. In that respect, he serves as a surrogate for military members who have no such voice—the dead, wounded, traumatized, brain-injured, and suicide victims but also those on active duty who are prohibited from articulating specific positions on policy matters. By dubbing him Foreign Policy Analyst, *TDSWJS* empowered Riggle to criticize the 2007 assessment of the war in Iraq that President Bush made after visiting the country for six hours.[19] When Stewart wonders if Bush had enough time to “make sense of such a complex situation,” Riggle replies by brandishing a mug emblazoned with the sign of corporate geopolitical victory: “Burger King, Iraq.” Referencing the exporting of U.S. fast food to a war zone as an empty signifier of success, Riggle assures Stewart, “I knew Iraq was a success story the minute I landed in Baghdad. If a Burger King mug doesn’t say we won, nothing does.” Riggle’s insider status also lends credibility to his countering the “with us or against us” rhetoric implemented by the Bush administration and its supporters against detractors of its policies.



Stewart speaks to Riggle on the phone about the Marine's desire to fight firemonsters.



Riggle mocks the Bush administration's diversions of resources from Afghanistan to Iraq.

Reporting on an April 2008 Pentagon and US Government Accountability Office assessment of progress in the “war on terror,” Riggle announces:

“In the U.S. war on terror, we’ve been walking in a fucking circle. [...] In 2001 there was a memo: ‘Bin Laden determined to attack the United States from a safe haven in Afghanistan.’ Now, seven years and seven billion dollars later, we get a new memo saying, ‘Bin Laden determined to attack the United States from a safe haven somewhere around Afghanistan.’ We’re right back where we started! We could have gotten here by doing nothing!”[20]

Directly challenging Bush’s sense of accomplishment, the veteran continues by comparing his leadership style to a family road trip gone horribly wrong:

“I knew this motherfucker didn’t know where he was going. [...] America was just in the back seat acting like, ‘I don’t think this was the way to defeat al-Qaeda,’ and he’s like [in a Bush voice] ‘I know what I’m doing. Heh heh. I know a short cut through Iraq. Everybody come on now, just trust me.’ We’re all like, ‘I don’t know. Maybe we should ask for directions. Y’know, I’m pretty sure al-Qaeda’s the other way,’ and he’s like, ‘SHUT UP! SHUT UP! What the hell? I’ll dump your ass in Yemen! You’re just like your mother! Keep your hand off the radio, goddamit!’”[21]

At his tirade’s end, a visibly frustrated Riggle sarcastically responds to Stewart’s question about what the President might change in light of this intel. “This’ll be a wakeup call,” he grumbles. “If there’s anything this President responds to, it’s written criticism.” Riggle’s trademark jocularity fades after he calls out the former President for his famous lack of curiosity about details and preference for easily digestible information rather than the nuances of war that matter, especially to the men and women serving as agents of state aggression.

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# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Riggle suits up to waterboard a victim he “lured through a fake Craigslist ad.”



Riggle begins his waterboarding for the CIA.



Riggle demands “actionable intelligence” from his victim.

Riggle’s work also skewers the Bush administration’s attempt to legitimize torture as a further extension of nationalizing state violence in war. In a 2006 segment Riggle explicitly satirizes Fox News’ approval of Bush-era torture policies via his mock pro-torture argument.[22] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] Explaining to Stewart that, unlike Fox News reporter Steve Harrigan and his experience of waterboarding from the tortured’s perspective, Riggle will test the point of view of the “waterboard-er.”[23] Pulling on a mask, he giggles and dumps a bottle of water on his victim before describing the feeling as “pretty good...I like the power part. Nice boost of self-esteem. It’s a pretty good stress reliever. Honestly, I’m feeling some delusions of grandeur right now. It’s what they call a torturer’s high.” “Waterboarding really works,” he informs Jon, demanding that his victim reveal the capital of Maryland. When the waterboarded sputters, “Baltimore,” Riggle notes, “See? That’s actionable intelligence.” He explodes in anger after Stewart reminds him that the capital is actually Annapolis, telling his victim that he will be on *Jeopardy* next week and needs to know some state capitals. Here, the extradiegetic frame of his veteran status complicates Stewart’s more straightforward critique. Riggle voices satiric support of torture as a military expert, but his belligerent correspondent’s persona also evokes the stereotype of the angry veteran.

Riggle’s polyvocal critique of the administrative handling of the war was especially poignant in his 2007 USO tour in Iraq and when he reported on the vaguely defined mission, which he successively named

- Operation Silent Thunder for the obvious fart joke;
- Operation Fluffy Bunny, which, he explains, the Pentagon requested because it was developing a weapon that “would actually silence thunder”;
- Operation Macho-Kick-Ass, which he refused to explain to Stewart, cautioning, “Don’t ask, don’t tell”; and
- Operation Thundering Cameltoe, the Iraqis’ choice, despite the name’s “los[ing] something in translation. In Arabic, though, it’s very scary.”[24]

The shifting mission name, from farcical to emasculated to hypermasculine to crude physiological slang, are sly winks both to the renaming of “Operation Infinite Justice,” the first official coinage of the war in Afghanistan, to “Operation Enduring Freedom” and to the reminder that troops remained in Iraq, long after the initial purported missions (to find Saddam Hussein’s purported weapons and drive him from power) were abandoned or over.

During his USO tour he filed reports that explicitly counter the claims of elected officials who briefly visited the country. Specifically, Riggle subverts such talking



Stewart introduces Riggle’s segment during the latter’s USO tour in Iraq.

points as then Indiana Representative Mike Pence's claim that Baghdad was "like a normal Indiana market in the summertime" where, as Representative Lindsay Graham noted, one could purchase "five rugs for five bucks." [25] Pence and Graham here invert Code Pink's argument against Marine recruitment in Berkeley. The politicians' much publicized and heavily guarded tour through the Shorjah Market in Baghdad offered support for propaganda about Bush's 2007 troop "surge" in Iraq, which increased troop numbers on the ground in order in an attempt to stop sectarian violence among the Sunni, Shiite, and Kurd populations.



Riggle suits up for his comparative tour of the ways Iraq resembles Indiana.

<p><i>The Daily Show with Jon Stewart</i> features then Indiana Representative Mike Pence comparing the market he visited to "a normal Indiana market in the summer."</p>	<p>South Carolina Representative Lindsay Graham describes the deal he got on rugs.</p>

The Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) contended at the time that issues such as overextension and stop-loss have significantly hindered military readiness:

"according to some military experts, 90 percent of National Guard units are not ready to respond to a domestic crisis." [26]

Riggle reframes the politicians' portrayal of shopping as evidence of U.S. military success as ignorance both of the ground truth of war and of the toll that their political maneuvering takes on the troops themselves.

Set to the nondiegetic theme music of *The Andy Griffith Show* (Sheldon Leonard, 1960-1968), Riggle mocks the politicians with a montage comparing Indiana to Iraq. He skips a rock into a wall of sandbags, takes a helicopter ride over the Iraqi "cornfields," and brings a beach ball onto a PT boat for a ride into a mined "Party Cove." Next, his interviews with Hoosier soldiers negate the politicians' claims of increasing security in Baghdad at every turn, but his vocal tone shifts when he reminds the audience that these soldiers only get two weeks' furlough to visit home and that their twelve-month tours were extended to fifteen months due to stop-loss. A second montage of mostly rustic Indiana scenes contrast images of ongoing violence in Iraq. The segment's criticism of the nation's contract with the soldiers changing midstream, along with the repetition of Pence's comparing the warzone to Indiana, emphasize Riggle's sense that "it's not America, it's America's military that's fighting these wars." [27] As war tourists, elected U.S. officials who legislate policies of war do "business as usual," which amounts to reciting the talking points that support the prolonging of the war, not the soldiers fighting it.



Riggle asks his audience if anyone fighting in Operation Fluffy Bunny is from Indiana.



Riggle interviews a soldier from Indiana during his 2007 USO tour.



A mock Indiana Gazette cover describing how stop-loss works.



Riggle flying over the "cornfields" of Iraq.



Indiana farmland featured in juxtaposition to the combat zone of Iraq.



Infamous basketball coach Bobby Knight is featured in the montage comparing Indiana to Iraq.



A typical scene in Iraq.



Riggle demonstrates "shooting squirrels with my Red Rider BB gun."

## Bringing the war home: Riggle in film

While less politically driven, many of Riggle's other roles in film from this time period similarly define patriotism as masculine bravado. In *The Other Guys*, Riggle's persona continues to develop his stock aggressive role as Martin, an abusive, loud alpha male who makes sport of bullying Allen Gamble (Will Ferrell)





As Detective Evan Martin, Riggall berates Will Farrell's Detective Allen "Gator" Gamble into shooting his gun at his desk in *The Other Guys* (Columbia Pictures, 2010).



Riggall as Detective Franklin interrogates the protagonists of *The Hangover* (Warner Bros, 2009).



In *The Killers* (Lionsgate, 2010), Riggall as Henry feigns being too drunk to drive so that he can sleep over.



Henry apologizes for bleeding on his chair in *The Killers* (Lionsgate, 2010).

and Terry Hoitz (Mark Wahlberg) for being cops who have desk jobs. Riggall's Martin taunts Gamble, his "Paper Bitch," to convince him to do a "desk pop" by firing his weapon at his desk. He cajoles, "Look, we honor the flag. And you crap on it when you don't shoot your gun in the office. Be a man." His claim that weaponized violence honors the country echoes the jingoist rhetoric of the false dilemma that pervaded public discourse in the wake of 9/11: either Gamble shoots the weapon, or the terrorists have won.

In these roles, Riggall's onscreen violent aggression is often triggered by his own victimization. We see this in particular in *The Hangover* (Todd Phillips, 2009). Riggall plays a sadistic Las Vegas Police Officer Franklin, whose car is stolen by the protagonists. When they say they need to return in time for their friend's wedding, Franklin takes Stu (fellow *TDSWJS* alum Ed Helms), Phil (Bradley Cooper), and Alan (Zach Galifianakis) to an elementary school classroom where he demonstrates to the students "how a stun gun is used to restrain a suspect." One way is "up close and personal," he explains to the giggling students as he applies the taser to Stu's neck, causing him to scream and fall on the floor. Franklin then chooses a young female volunteer to demonstrate how to shoot from a distance: "all you gotta do is point, aim, and shoot." Following orders to step forward, Phil tries to convince her that she does not need to do this while she aims and fires. "Finish him!" shouts Franklin maniacally. As Phil collapses in pain, Franklin compliments the girl's aim: "Right in the nuts! That was beautiful!" This performance is, on one hand, a caricature of the sadistic cop. But on the other, when read as a continuum from his earlier *TDSWJS* work, it suggests more of an intertextually informed ironic critique of torture tactics used on foreign and domestic enemies of the United States.



Detective Franklin reacts to a school child's accurate taser shot on *The Hangover* (Warner Bros., 2009).



Detective Franklin celebrates the pain inflicted on Alan (Zach Galifianakis) in *The Hangover* (Warner Bros., 2009).

Riggall's performance of Henry in the Katherine Heigl/Ashton Kutcher-helmed comedy *Killers* (Robert Luketic, 2010) continues his characters' exploration of torture from the perspective of the bound and bloodied victim. Henry is a mercenary killer for hire but first appears to be the sidekick of protagonist Spencer Aimes (Ashton Kutcher), a CIA agent gone domestically rogue. At Spencer's surprise party, Henry gets too drunk to drive home, but his overindulgence turns out to be a ruse. The next morning he stumbles into the kitchen to launch a knife attack on Spencer, and an extended fight scene ensues.

His hand-to-hand combat skills notwithstanding, Henry finds himself duct-taped to a chair, a subject for Spencer to torture for information. When Spencer's shocked wife Jen (Katherine Heigl) enters the room, Henry earnestly apologizes for bleeding on the chair. In this intertextual moment, Riggall the veteran brings the "war on terror" home, not just in America's backyard but into its living rooms: the enemy must be fought here as well as "over there." Riggall's military service thus lends credibility to his role as trained killer as it evokes the U.S. veteran's historical lineage of postwar mercenary murder for hire, popularized after Vietnam with the magazine *Soldier of Fortune* and 1980s Hollywood in films such as *Uncommon Valor* (Ted Kotcheff, 1983). Yet Henry's bloody, beaten figure also recalls the CIA's collusion with the "war on terror's" torture scandals of Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib.

## Post-traumatic stress and canned laughter



Riggle portrays Mitch's homecoming from war in *Gary Unmarried* (CBS 2008-2010).



Mitch describes an airstrike in *Gary Unmarried* (CBS 2008-2010).



Mitch physically intimidates Bradley (Sterling Beauman) in *Gary Unmarried* (CBS 2008-2010).



Bradley reacts to Mitch in *Gary Unmarried* (CBS 2008-2010).

After leaving *TDSWJS*, Riggle had a recurring guest role as a Marine in between tours in Afghanistan on the working-class, CBS primetime sitcom *Gary Unmarried* (2008-2010) about a recently divorced father Gary (Jay Mohr) navigating co-parenting and the dating world. Riggle's work on this series trafficked in tropes of the combat-damaged veteran who struggles to assimilate into a society largely untouched by the ongoing wars. For a war-weary audience, this show, structured as a family sit-com, presented notions about combat veterans and traumas in brief, non-threatening moments that were punctuated by a canned laugh track. As Inger-Lise Kalvinknes Bore explains, the lack track functions to "ensure that the comedy feels like a 'safe' space where it is okay to laugh at people's misfortunes and transgressions," and in this case, at Mitch's PTSD episodes.[28] The sitcom format here poses a limited negotiation with imperial warfare and its traumatic toll on those sent abroad to wage it.

Riggle's eight-episode narrative arc as Mitch, Gary's half-brother, operates as a traditional veteran's return narrative with echoes of *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946) but in a scripted sitcom world that mirrors a U.S. society that wages, yet seems unaware of, its wars abroad. While sitcoms can, as Joanne Morreale writes, "address significant ideas and issues within seemingly innocuous narrative frames," the show's use of canned laughter tempers the critique of our culture's creation, treatment, and trauma of its trained warriors.[29] Potentially poignant discussions about Mitch's war experiences and veteran status are digested into lighter fare. For instance, in an episode in which the half-brothers land in jail for wrestling in a Las Vegas Casino, their pothead father Jack (Max Gail) bails them out, encouraging them to help each other through the "terrible situations" they have experienced recently. "One of you has been in a senseless quagmire fighting a devious enemy," he explains. "And Mitch was at war." [30] Here the laugh track deflects Mitch's combat experiences by aligning marriage to Gary's ex-wife Allison (Paula Marshall) to ongoing asymmetrical warfare.

Mitch's arrival depicts a conventional return scenario with the family gathered around to hear a war story in which he pantomimes an airstrike on a goat that was mistaken for a military target, much to Louise's horror. Though his narrative about the missed airstrike and friendly fire depicts these events as humorous, it cannot fully recuperate the incident's reference to actual friendly fire incidents, such as the one that infamously took the life of Pat Tillman. In 2002, Tillman, a safety on the Arizona Cardinals, became the celebrity face of U.S. military heroism by leaving his successful NFL career to become an Army Ranger and deploy to Afghanistan. The sitcom also transfers Mitch's implicit PTSD to Gary, who awakens panicked in the middle of the night to the sound of gunfire from Mitch and the kids playing a video game. Gary finds Mitch issuing tactical maneuver orders to Louise (Kathryn Newton) and Tom (Ryan Malgarini), which culminate in Louise's victorious shout, "Die you Nazi Scum!" When Gary pulls the Xbox's plug and complains about the noise, Mitch responds, "Sorry, hippie! You know what else is loud? Real war," thus reanimating the binary of cowardly complaining civilians and bravely sacrificing soldiers perpetuated by pro-war politicians and pundits in the wake of 9/11.

As Mitch, Riggle pushes the boundaries of common tropes of the returning veteran narrative with its traumatized, angry, and often stigmatized veterans, as well as the gap between civilian perceptions of what it means to "support the troops" and the ground truth of military experience. These are stock characteristics of the veteran but mocked with shorthand references that are undercut but not erased by *Gary Unmarried's* laugh track. For example, when Gary and his ex-wife mock a bright red Hawaiian shirt that Mitch wears on an unsuccessful blind date, he responds, "That's a fun game: make fun of the trained killer. Let's see how that one turns out." These tropes, codified as they were in





After Mitch terrifies Louise's dancing partner, he takes the boy's place in *Gary Unmarried* (CBS 2008-2010).



Mitch dancing with Louise (Kathryn Newton) in *Gary Unmarried* (CBS 2008-2010).



Mitch and Louise strike a pose at the end of their routine in *Gary Unmarried* (CBS 2008-2010).

numerous Vietnam War films, include sensitivity to triggers that feel like combat, anger at uncomprehending civilians, sharing discomfiting combat stories, flashbacks to the traumatic experience, the sense that one is never safe and must remain ever watchful, and the difficulty of converting life-preserving combat skills to meaningful employment on the home front.[31]

Riggle's appearances on *Gary Unmarried* as the half-brother who sleeps on the couch while looking for work extends his critique of empty rhetoric as justification for war, such as when he explains why he moved the neighbor's basketball goal to Gary's driveway: "I fought for the man's freedom, all right? I think he'd want me to have it." [32] Mitch explicitly invokes the veteran's return and subverts the lack of support from a supposedly "grateful nation" by insisting on recognition for military service. This recurring device attempts to play Mitch's trauma for humor, starting with his debut episode in which his pothead father Jack forgets to pick him up from the airport. This incident glosses over the abandonment issues that can plague veterans and that was particularly emblematic of representations of veterans of the Vietnam War. Mitch also foregrounds less mythical aspects of war, such as the plight of Afghani children six years after their "liberation." "Wow, you guys got big," Mitch tells his teenage nephew and his adolescent niece Louise on his first day home. "If we were in Afghanistan, you'd be working in the opium fields," he says to Tom, and to Louise, "and you'd be getting married." Here the comedian emphasizes the plight of civilians struggling under U.S. military occupation to an audience who may or may not be plugged in to its other unplanned effects, such as the liberation of Afghani heroin production and the continuing oppression of women. The idea of a married adolescent female also points to the Taliban's strength and resurgence, eight years after the invasion of Afghanistan, which calls the Marine's mission—and the nation's—into question. [33] The show's comic frame relies on an assumption that viewers are detached enough from the wars waged abroad to find humor in them.

Set in northern California, *Gary Unmarried* picks up where Riggle left off on *TDSWJS* in his critique of anti-military protest in Berkeley when Mitch takes Louise to her hip-hop dance class and meets her dance partner, Bradley (Sterling Beaman), who recites a litany of anti-war/anti-Marine talking points.[34] Louise explains to Mitch that Bradley's dad teaches "dance and movement at Berkeley." When she leaves them to stretch, Mitch and Bradley's stereotypical exchange pits Bradley's parroting of his father's soundbytes against Mitch's increasingly loud, oversimplified rhetoric of military service as the abstract protection of freedom.

Bradley tells Mitch, "Louise said you were a Marine," and Mitch jocularly responds, "she didn't tell you I was decorated? That's weird." "My dad doesn't like the Marines," challenges Bradley. When Mitch replies, "This is America, and your dad is entitled to his opinion," Bradley pushes harder, saying "He's anti-war....He says our national anthem should be the 'Star Spangled Bummer.'" This triggers physical aggression from Mitch, who grabs the boy's collar, gets in his face, and asks him, "who do you think it is that provides your dad with the security and freedom and protection to prance around Berkeley teaching a class called movement? You think it's the Marines, Bradley?!" Mitch releases the stunned boy with the message to ask his father what "language he'd be speaking if the Marines who stormed the beaches of Normandy had been anti-war." Their recitation of the stereotypical Left-Right talking points highlights the problematic gap between soldiers and civilians—who do not have to personally sacrifice in the "war on terror" thanks to the selective service draft ending in 1973. Though the laugh track accompanies Mitch's man-on-boy violence, it does not fully obscure the portrayal of the war veteran as quick to anger. Mitch nevertheless undercuts this traumatic and hypermasculine posturing by dancing in Bradley's place with Louise for her performance.

Such professionalization of warrior culture, however, also emphasizes the struggles many combat soldiers have when attempting to transfer their martial skills into civilian occupations. When Mitch returns to Gary's house in the



sitcom's second season, after his second tour in Afghanistan, his PTSD is more prominent, and he struggles to find employment.[35] Instead of teaching his niece to kill "Nazi scum," he turns down Gary's offer to play *Gears of War* because it is "too soon"; war videogames now pose a traumatic encounter. Mitch thus complicates the picture of U.S. society's attempts to re-civilize its trained killers, though not without intertextual irony. Riggle is, after all, a whole-bodied veteran who is a successful, professional comedian. Nevertheless, Mitch does model the unemployable veteran suffering from "invisible wounds," a member of the twenty percent "of new veterans [...] experiencing symptoms of [...] PTSD or major depression." [36] These problems can exacerbate veterans' high rates of divorce, drug use, and high incidences of suicide and are compounded by the overburdened Veteran Administration.[37]

Mitch's self-referential character thus makes visible the otherwise hidden problems of veterans who struggle to acclimate upon return to the States and find a job. Initially, he works with Gary's painting business during his first furlough, but when he returns from his second tour in Afghanistan, Gary has become a radio sportscaster, and Mitch can't find work, a reference to veteran unemployment levels that reached 21% in 2010.[38] Though Mitch lists the state of the economy as a factor, unemployment tends to be significantly higher, and wages and income tend to be lower for veterans than civilians.[39] Asking Gary for help, he explains that he "did a ton of radio work" in Afghanistan "calling in air strikes" but finds that raining death from above does not naturally transfer to civilian job skills. Mitch auditions to work as Gary's sidekick, "Machine Gun Mitch," but the episode again deploys the trope of the angry veteran and depicts him threatening the callers. When one insults Gary, who laughs it off, Mitch responds by telling the caller, a boy, that he will hunt him down "and show you how I can tie my shoe from inside your mouth." After the station manager Sasha (Brooke D'Orsay) points out that "he told a little boy he was going to drop-kick him into traffic, Gary "promotes" him to Sasha's assistant because, he "owes" Mitch. They had planned to enlist in the Marines together, but the news of Gary's wife's first pregnancy stopped him at the recruiting station, thus abandoning Mitch to go it alone.

This actual demotion triggers another PTSD episode, in which Major League Baseball former player and manager Joe Torre startles Mitch by approaching him from behind; Mitch responds by pinning Torre to his desk in a headlock. "You shouldn't sneak up behind me," he tells Torre. "The military kinda taught me to kill people who did that." Torre graciously accepts the apology but finds himself in a second headlock when, responding to Mitch's request for an autograph, he reaches into his jacket, a movement Mitch reads as reaching for a weapon. Shortly afterward, a visibly hurt Mitch asks why Gary has encouraged him twice only to fire him. Gary admits that Mitch has become the caricature of the crazy veteran: "You kinda freak everybody out." After an exchange in which Mitch accuses Gary of bailing on him again, Gary gives up and informs him, "I'm done helping you." Significantly, the show suspends the laugh track when Mitch paints a portrait of how the country needs to support its service members: "You never started helping



Mitch puts Joe Torre in a headlock for approaching him from behind in *Gary Unmarried* (CBS 2008-2010).



Mitch tells Gary (Jay Mohr) that he knows how Rambo felt in *Gary Unmarried* (CBS 2008-2010).



Gary confronts Mitch at the gun range in *Gary Unmarried* (CBS 2008-2010).



Mitch sobs in Gary's arms in *Gary Unmarried* (CBS 2008-2010).



Mitch longs for his Marines identity in *Gary Unmarried* (CBS 2008-2010).

me, all right? Doing nothing would have been better than setting me up to fail twice [...] I'm home from the service, and I just need a little support, and you let me down bro." After a pause, Mitch continues, "Now I know how Rambo felt," and exits as the laugh track resumes.

Extending *Gary Unmarried*'s Rambo analogy, Mitch holes up in a shooting range when Gary tracks him down to tell him to grow up and figure out what he wants to do with his life. Pistol still in hand, Mitch cries on Gary's shoulder, occasionally waving his weapon around and pointing it at his brother. "I'm scared, Gary. I'm so scared. When I was in the Marines I knew who I was," he sobs, as Gary and other shooters nervously eye his gun. However, Mitch calms down and acknowledges that Gary is right. After a brief stint as a wedding planner, he tells Gary that he wants to do something that "makes a difference." He wants to be a Marine, so he is re-enlisting. Like Rambo, the epitome of the maladjusted veteran who couldn't return to the States until 2008's *Rambo* (Sylvester Stallone), Mitch remains unfit for civilian life, another trope of the traumatized soldier's return narrative in dramatic films and television programs, from *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978) and *First Blood* (Ted Kotcheff, 1982) to, more recently, *Home of the Brave* (Irwin Winkler, 2008), *Return* (Liza Johnson, 2011), and *Thank You For Your Service* (Jason Hall, 2017).

Since these episodes of *Gary Unmarried* aired, scholars and researchers have developed a better understanding of how PTSD symptoms can be effectively managed through treatments. And as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have wound down in many ways, so have depictions of traumatized veterans in popular culture. *American Sniper* (Clint Eastwood, 2014) reignited cultural debate about the Iraq War and portrayals of veterans as troubled, particularly by adding scenes of PTSD to the film that did not exist in the film.[40] Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America Founder and Executive Director Paul Riekhoff articulates the problems that the "crazy veteran" stereotype, embodied in the fictional Rambo, presents for the 1.8 million veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan in a society in which less than 1% of the population have served in the "war on terror." A minor "celebrity veteran" who makes regular appearances on cable news and has appeared both on *TDSWJS* and *The Colbert Report*, Reikhoff warned in 2009 that the "disconnect" between civilians and service members can have "real consequences," because polls report that "employers often say they don't know what skills veterans can bring to their company. More than 11 percent who served after 9/11 are out of work." [41]

Yet more recently the formation of organizations has also raised awareness, such as Got Your 6, a veteran empowerment organization that Riggle collaborates with; this group seeks to close the gap between civilians and veterans and military families by "chang[ing] the conversation in America, so that our returning veterans are not seen as liabilities but assets." [42] Another, Veterans in Film and Television (VFT) assists television and film productions in hiring veterans. In 2015, an Afghanistan war veteran, working with Michelle Obama and Bradley Cooper, unveiled an initiative called "6 Certified," which offers a veteran's seal of approval to fictional works depicting veterans more realistically and with more range than we were seeing in earlier years of the war.[43]

Rob Riggle's body of work is still developing, and more can be drawn from his intertextual embodiment of soldiers' stories in particular and the demobilization of the "war on terror's" service members in general. While it lies outside of the scope of this essay, his performance in *12 Strong* of Lt. Col. Max Bowers, a real-life character under whom Riggle actually served in Afghanistan as a Marine Captain in 2001-2002, serves as a counterpoint to the roles that exploit his physicality and rough humor. Riggle's Bowers calmly discusses strategy with the U.S. Special Forces, the first sent to Afghanistan after 9/11/01, tasked with assisting the Northern Alliance take Mazar-i-Sharif. True to his Marines' "First to fight, last to leave" motto, Riggle's initial service over there informs his career trajectory over here, particularly his continued work with veterans. Riggle thus

continues to serve as a reference point for the cultural work left to do by U.S. society for and with its veterans, especially the rank-and-file who often struggle the most during re-entry.

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## Notes

1. "Marines in Berkeley," *The Daily Show*, March 10, 2008, accessed January 1, 2012, <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/gfgyc6/the-daily-show-with-jon-stewart-marines-in-berkeley>. [return to page 1]
2. Riggle has made several appearances on *The Daily Show* since 2008, his last visit as recent as 2015.
3. Stacy Takacs, "The Body of War and the Management of Imperial Anxiety on US Television," *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies* 3.1 (2009): 86.
4. *National Terrorism Strike Force: San Diego: Sport Utility Vehicle, or NTSF:SD:SUV* is a parodic cop show that appeared as part of the Cartoon Network's Adult Swim programming from 2011-2013.
5. Shira Maguen and Brett Litz, "Moral Injury in Veterans of War," *PTSD Research Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (2012): 1-3.
6. Eric Schmitt, "Iraq-Bound Troops Confront Rumsfeld Over Lack of Armor," *The New York Times*, December 8, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/08/international/middleeast/iraqbound-troops-confront-rumsfeld-over-lack-of.html>.
7. Marc Maron, "Episode 194: Rob Riggle," *WTF with Marc Maron Podcast*, iTunes, July 21, 2011.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. On his short *SNL* career, see Megh Wright, "Saturday Night's Children: Rob Riggle (2004-2005)," *Vulture*, October 18, 2011. <https://www.vulture.com/2011/10/saturday-nights-children-rob-riggle-2004-2005.html>. For discussion of his coast-to-coast commute, which ultimately led to him leaving *TDSWJS*, See Maron, "Episode 194."
12. Team Mighty, "The Mighty 25: Veterans to Watch in 2017," *We Are the Mighty*, January 25, 2017, <http://www.wearethemighty.com/articles/mighty-25-veterans-watch-2017>.
13. Joey Hodo and Chris Kleckner, "The Extension: Exclusive Interview with Rob Riggle," *Funny or Die*, accessed September 30, 2010 [interview no longer exists online].
14. "Riggle's Picks" is also a podcast entitled "Riggle's Picks with Rob Riggle & Sarah Tiana," available on iTunes, as of January 2018.
15. "The News Better Run," *The Daily Show*, August 7, 2008, September 27, 2019, <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/jkzqmp/the-daily-show-with-jon-stewart>.

[the-news-better-run---rob-riggle](#).

16. "C\*A\*S\*H," *The Daily Show*, May 29, 2008, accessed February 15, 2012, <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/6bjvro/the-daily-show-with-jon-stewart-c-a-s-h>.

17. Ibid.

18. "McCain Defends Opposition to GI Bill," *CNN*, May 26, 2008, <http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/05/26/mccain/>.

19. "Three Hour Quagmire," *The Daily Show*, September 10, 2007, accessed February 15, 2012, <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/jlb9fw/the-daily-show-with-jon-stewart-three-hour-quagmire>.

20. "Exit: Strategy," *The Daily Show*, April 22, 2008, accessed February 15, 2012, <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/houihx/the-daily-show-with-jon-stewart-exit-strategy>.

21. Ibid.

22. "Flushed Away," *The Daily Show*, November 16, 2006, accessed March 3, 2011, <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/kq92ti/the-daily-show-with-jon-stewart-flushed-away>. [return to page 2]

23. This segment responded to Fox News' Steve Harrigan undergoing a brief session of waterboarding on an episode *On the Record with Greta Van Susteren*, where he determined that the torture technique as "a pretty efficient mechanism to get someone to talk and then still have them alive and healthy within minutes." See "Waterboarding: Historically Controversial," *Fox News*, November 7, 2006, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170205145233/http://foxnews.com/story/2006/11/07/waterboarding-historically-controversial.html>; and "Fox News Correspondent on His On-Air 'Waterboarding': 'A Pretty Efficient Mechanism to Get Someone to Talk and Then Still Have Them Alive and Healthy within Minutes,'" *Media Matters for America*, November 6, 2006, <https://mediamatters.org/research/2006/11/06/fox-news-correspondent-on-his-on-air-waterboard/137225>.

24. "Operation Silent Thunder," *The Daily Show*, August 20, 2007, accessed March 2, 2011, <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/sfdqbw/the-daily-show-with-jon-stewart-operation-silent-thunder>; "Operation Fluffy Bunny," *The Daily Show*, August 21, 2007, accessed March 2, 2011, <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/tzc6ka/the-daily-show-with-jon-stewart-operation-fluffy-bunny>; "Operation Macho Kick-Ass," *The Daily Show*, August 22, 2007, accessed March 2, 2011, <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/tjdkrg/the-daily-show-with-jon-stewart-operation-macho-kick-ass>; "Operation Thundering Cameltoe," *The Daily Show*, August 23, 2007, accessed March 2, 2011, <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/272o9f/the-daily-show-with-jon-stewart-operation-thundering-cameltoe>.

25. "Operation Fluffy Bunny."

26. "A Breaking Military: Overextension Threatens Readiness," *IAVA*, January 2008, accessed October 28, 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20100213054225/http://iava.org/iava-in-washington/issue-reports>.

27. Maron, "Episode 194."

28. Inger-Lise Kalviknes Bore, "Laughing Together? TV Comedy Audiences and the Laugh Track," *The Velvet Light Trap* 68 (2011): 24-34.

29. Joanne Morreale, "Introduction," *Critiquing the Sitcom* (Syracuse: Syracuse

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30. "Gary's Half Brother," *Gary Unmarried*, Amazon.com video on demand, (Los Angeles: CBS, 2009).

31. Though this stereotype exists in films about other wars, particularly World War II's *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946), films about the Vietnam War crystallized the icon of the traumatized veteran who cannot adjust to civilian United States. In addition to the wealth of veteran memoirs available, see Shay (1994; 2003).

32. "Gary's Half Brother."

33. Reuters reported in January 2012 that a United States report indicates that the Taliban would retake control of Afghanistan once the NATO-led troops withdraw. "U.S. Military Says Taliban Set to Retake Power: Report," *Reuters.com*, January 31, 2012, accessed February 4, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/01/us-afghan-nato-report-idUSTRE81006N20120201>.

34. "Gary Has a Dream," *Gary Unmarried*, Amazon.com video on demand, (Los Angeles: CBS, 2009).

35. "Gary Tries to Find Something for Mitch," *Gary Unmarried*, Amazon.com video on demand, (Los Angeles: CBS, 2010).

36. The IAVA reports, "Nineteen percent of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have experienced a probably Traumatic Brain Injury, or TBI, during their deployment. And tens of thousands of new veterans are coping with both psychological injuries and TBI, the effects of which can compound each other." "Invisible Wounds: Psychological and Neurological Injuries Confront A New Generation of Veterans," January 2009, accessed October 28, 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20100213054225/http://iava.org/iava-in-washington/issue-reports>.

37. As the 35,000 wounded veterans seek medical attention, they "are forced to wait months, and sometimes years for the care and disability compensation they deserve" due to the "antiquated and deeply-flawed military and veterans' health care and disability systems" "Red Tape: Veterans Fight New Battles for Care and Benefits," IAVA, February 2010, accessed October 28, 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20100213054225/http://iava.org/iava-in-washington/issue-reports>.

38. Ron Capps, "The New Lost Generation," *Foreign Policy* August 10, 2010, accessed February 15, 2012, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/08/10/the\\_new\\_lost\\_generation](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/08/10/the_new_lost_generation).

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40. See Anna Froula, "What Keeps Me Up At Night: Media Studies Fifteen Years After 9/11," *Cinema Journal* 56.1 (2016): 111-118; and Tony Grajeda, "Remembering and Mis-Remembering 9/11: *American Sniper* and Historical Trauma," Paper presented at the Society of Cinema and Media Studies, Atlanta, Georgia, 2016.

41. Paul Rieckhoff, "My Turn: Who Are You Calling Rambo?" *Newsweek*, June 12, 2009, accessed March 1, 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20121018140052/http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2009/06/13/who-are-you-calling-rambo.html>.



42. "About," *Got Your Six*, accessed 8 August 2012, <http://www.gotyoursix.org/about/>.

43. David Phillips, "Veterans Pan, and Cheer, Their Counterparts on the Screen," *New York Times*, February 5, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/06/us/veterans-pan-and-cheer-their-counterparts-on-the-screen.html>.

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## Clint Eastwood's *The Mule* — an old man's tale

by [Robert Alpert](#)



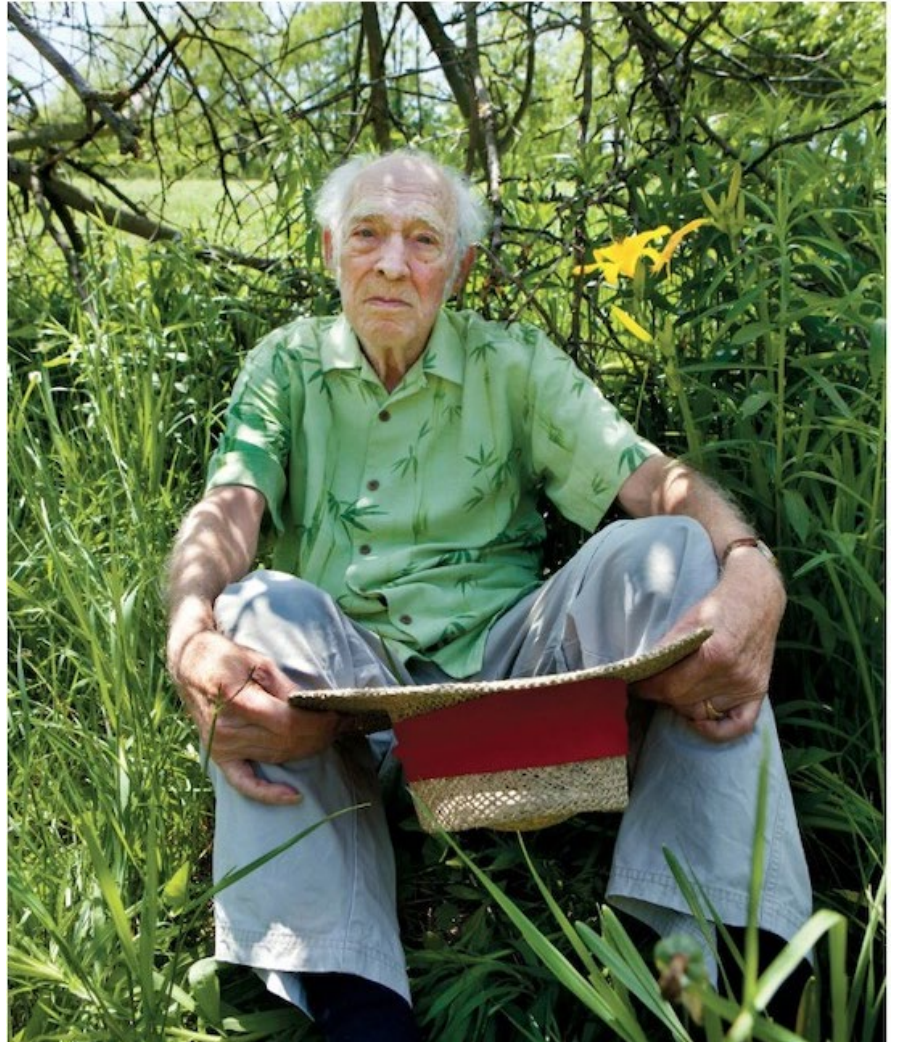
In *Bronco Billy*, which Clint Eastwood directed in 1980, Antoinette Lily, who has resisted the children's fantasy of Bronco Billy's Wild West show, asks Bronco Billy, an ex-convict for the attempted murder of his wife, "Are you for real?"



"I'm who I want to be," replies Bronco Billy, played by Clint Eastwood, who was then living with Sondra Locke, who plays Antoinette Lily.

The movie *The Mule* is based on Sam Dolnick's article "There's a True Story Behind 'The Mule': The Sinaloa Cartel's 90-Year-Old Drug Mule" in *The NY Times Magazine*, June 2014.[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] Dolnick writes about a 90-year old drug courier, Leo Sharp—known by the nickname Tata or grandfather—who worked many years for the Mexican cartel headed by Joaquín Guzmán (El Chapo).

# There's a True Story Behind 'The Mule': The Sinaloa Cartel's 90-Year-Old Drug Mule



The movie *The Mule* originated in a *NY Times Magazine* article about a 90-year old former horticulturalist who became a Mexican drug cartel's most successful mule.



*The Mule* opens with several shots of daylilies, beautiful flowers that blossom and then fade by the day's end.

A great grandfather who was also a World War II veteran, Sharp spent much of his life producing and selling small flowers, especially daylilies, and had acquired a national reputation through conventions, speaking engagements, newsletters, and his own annual catalogue. Dolnick describes how “[d]ay-lily enthusiasts used to make pilgrimages” to Sharp’s flower farms in Michigan City, Indiana and Apopka, Florida. As the Internet in the 1990s and early 2000s put an end to Sharp’s catalogue-based business, the grower, who had no criminal record, turned to driving the cartel’s drugs from Mexico to Detroit. With a respectable old man playing against type, it resulted in a highly profitable business venture for him as the number of kilos he transported with each trip increased. Over a decade of driving, Sharp became the cartel’s “one-man cocaine fountain, working on a scale the D.E.A. had never encountered.” The article also documents how the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) through informants eventually arrested Sharp in





It also introduces the unremarkable home and greenhouse of Earl Stone, who is tending to his daylilies.



The movie's ending likewise depicts Stone, now a successful drug mule, again tending his daylilies.

2012 and how Sharp later pleaded guilty to drug conspiracy charges, resulting in a sentence of three years in federal prison.

Nick Schenk, who had written the screenplay for *Gran Torino* (2008), wrote the screenplay for *The Mule*, and, like *Gran Torino*, Clint Eastwood both directed and starred in *The Mule*. The movie largely follows Dolnick's detailed article, including Sharp's eccentricities as a grandfatherly courier—erratic driving, eccentric and slovenly dress, an “uncertain gait,” difficulty in hearing and seeing, and stopping to enjoy local restaurants during his cross-country drives for the cartel.[2] The movie changes only a few significant details from Dolnick's article, such as changing the route ending in Detroit, where *Gran Torino* took place, to Chicago; and Leo Sharp becomes the character Earl Stone, a Korean War veteran, like Walt Kowalski in *Gran Torino*. Yet much of Dolnick's article remains. Earl Stone, played by the 88-year old Eastwood, has spent much of his life as a professional horticulturalist and achieved fame in a field that the Internet ended, resulting in his becoming a drug courier for a Mexican cartel. His value as a driver results from his lack of a criminal record, his not conforming to the stereotypical image of a courier, and his eccentricities that make it impossible for law enforcement—or the cartel, for that matter—to predict his routes, including unscheduled stops at celebrated, local restaurants and pleasurable drives through scenic national parks. Moreover, like the article, the movie also focuses on how DEA agents discover and eventually arrest Tapa, the cartel's most “prolific” courier, through an informant. Earl Stone, like Leo Sharp, pleads guilty and is remanded from the courthouse to a federal prison.



The camera then pulls out to reveal that Stone's in prison. Clint Eastwood's name as director and producer appears on a credit

IMDb succinctly summarizes the plot:

“A 90-year-old horticulturist and Korean War veteran is caught transporting \$3 million worth of cocaine through Illinois for a Mexican drug cartel.”



Like the ending of *The Mule*, the camera at the end of *Bronco Billy* pulls out, unexpectedly revealing the tent of Bronco Billy's Wild West show in a contemporary setting.

While commercially successful—surely due, in part, not only to Eastwood's fame but also to the classic editing, shot compositions and dramatic narrative structure without numbing CGI effects—movie reviewers were less enthusiastic and mixed in their views, critiquing the film's clichés, lack of realism as well as the racism and sexism of its central character.[3] In contrast, *Gran Torino* released 10 years earlier was both commercially and critically successful. It had openly critiqued the Eastwood mythology that had developed over the 50 years during which Eastwood had starred in or directed or both approximately 50 films, beginning with his appearance as the Man with No Name in Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) and his 1971 directorial debut in *Play Misty for Me* as a radio disc jockey. *Gran Torino*'s elegiac tone evoked the mythology that Eastwood had created—the Man with No Name, Dirty Harry and William Munny—only to observe the loneliness of his American hero and the darkness at the center of the



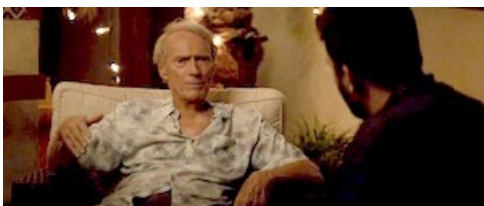
Antoinette Lily confronts Bronco Billy, who's about to attempt to rob a train. "You're living in a dream world," she tells him. "There are no more cowboys and Indians. That's in the past."



In reply, he offers the movie's lesson. "I was raised in a one room tenement in New Jersey. As a kid, I never even saw a cowboy, much less the wide-open spaces, except when I could scrounge up a quarter for a picture show."



"I was a shoe salesman until I was 31 years old. Deep down in my heart I always wanted to be a cowboy. One day I lay down my shoehorn and swore I'd never live in the city again. You only live once. You've got to give it your best shot." Eastwood's own father was a shoe salesman.



In *The Mule* Earl Stone conveys the same message as Bronco Billy but to a young handler for the drug cartel, Julio. He counsels Julio to quit the drug cartel, find something you love and go

mythology. [4]

*The Mule*, however, is more personal. It's akin to Eastwood's earlier, less commercially successful and somewhat critically overlooked *Bronco Billy* (1980). Directed by and starring Eastwood as Bronco Billy McCoy (named after Bronco Billy Anderson, the first cowboy film star and the director of dozens of short, silent westerns), *Bronco Billy* is a children's fairy tale about a small, traveling Wild West show with Eastwood as the boss of a group of misfits, alcoholics and ex-convicts. The film co-stars Sondra Locke as Antoinette Lily, an East Coast heiress who has married only so that she'll inherit a large family fortune and initially has only contempt for Bronco Billy and his cowboy fantasy as the "fastest gun in the West". By the end of the film, however, she falls in love with him and chooses to join his motley crew. Moreover, the film openly revels in the madness of its fantasy, reflected in a happy ending made possible only by the efforts of the patients of a mental institution and its chief psychiatrist. That Eastwood's own father was apparently a shoe salesman[5]—like Bronco Billy, who dropped his shoehorn and chose to become a circus cowboy—and that Sondra Locke was then Eastwood's lover—a relationship that would end many years later in a bitter palimony fight—underscore how personal *Bronco Billy* was to Eastwood. Reflecting Eastwood's own self-satisfaction with his career choice as actor and director, Eastwood could have been speaking for himself in an exchange in that film with Antoinette Lily. It's an intimate, somewhat awkward moment in which a fleeting look of madness appears on his character Bronco Billy's face:

Antoinette Lilly: Are you for real?

Bronco Billy McCoy: I'm who I want to be.

Released almost simultaneously with the belated announcement of Locke's death at age 74,[6] *The Mule* reflects upon Eastwood's career choice nearly 40 years later. Thus, the movie takes place in the present, not several years ago as in Dolnick's article. Moreover, a state trooper casually comments that Stone does a good Jimmy Stewart imitation, thereby evoking the iconic myth of decency in the face of social corruption that Eastwood as Hollywood star has embodied—though with a streak of violence, such as, for example, his role as the Preacher in *Pale Rider* (1985) or Bill Munny in *Unforgiven* (1992). That Eastwood dedicates the film to "Pierre and Richard," Pierre Rissient and Richard Schickel, two recently deceased friends and movie critics, further underscores that *The Mule* is intended to be personal.

Moreover, while family has often played a role in Eastwood's films—from the nontraditional, improvisational families in Eastwood's *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976) and *Bronco Billy* to the more constraining, traditional families in *Pale Rider* (1985), *Unforgiven* (1992) and *The Bridges of Madison County* (1995) to the mean spirited, vicious families in *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) and *Gran Torino*—*The Mule* places the events of Earl Stone's life as both horticulturist and drug courier squarely within the context of family.

Eastwood's own daughter, Alison Eastwood, plays his estranged daughter Iris in the movie. Significantly, too, Bradley Cooper, who had portrayed Chris Kyle as a Navy SEAL estranged from his family in Eastwood's *The Sniper* (2014), enacts the role of DEA Special Agent Jeffrey Moore (renamed Colin Bates in the movie), and he plays Bates as a character for whom work and family are in conflict. Bates' boss, DEA Special Agent in Charge (Laurence Fishburne), asks but doesn't care whether Bates' family is adjusting to his career move to Chicago, and Bates, in turn, expresses incredulity that his partner (Michael Peña) has five children. Moreover, Eastwood's Earl Stone becomes, in effect, Bates' mentor and confidant on matters of family, lecturing (and confessing to) Cooper's DEA Special Agent Bates on the need to place family over career. And Bates' acknowledgement of the wisdom of Stone's advice (even as he's arresting Stone) is soon followed by Stone's daughter Iris' darkly humorous comment in the courtroom scene that with Stone

after it. Julio rejects the advice, insisting that the cartel is family.



Julio later acknowledges that the cartel's new management operates under new, more business-like rules. We're not friends, he tells Earl and disappears from the film.



Experiencing an "ah, shit" moment when he forgets his wedding anniversary, DEA Agent Colin Bates, in contrast to Julio, will heed Earl Stone's advice over breakfast in a Waffle House.



"Don't follow in my footsteps and do what I did - put work in front of family... First position should be family," Earl tells him, confessing that his daughter hasn't spoken with him for 12 ½ years. "12 ½ years. It was like I never—It was like they were never there or something."



The drug cartel is a form of business. When Earl jokingly asks Latón, the cartel boss, how many people he had to kill to get a place like this, Latón replies, "Many, many people."

in federal prison, she'll at least now know where to find her father who has spent his entire life on the road.

The film dramatizes the sexism and often misogyny for which Eastwood is known through its equating of family with women. Earl Stone's family from which he is estranged consists entirely of women—his ex-wife Mary (Dianne Wiest), his daughter Iris, and his granddaughter Ginny (Taissa Farmiga). Stone is contemptuous of them, attending a convention rather than Iris' wedding and later dismissively commenting on how women love that sort of thing, wedding anniversaries, even as he's supposedly lecturing Bates on the importance of family events so as to avoid "ah, shit" moments. In another incident, while traveling on the road for the drug cartel, Stone mocks the gang of women bikers who identify themselves as "Dykes on Bikes," recalling an earlier episode in *The Gauntlet* (1977), where Eastwood's character, a cop named Ben Shockley, dispatches a biker, who's a woman, in a point-of-view shot that underscores the violence of the gesture and Shockley's hatred of women. A philanderer, the 90-year old Stone later sleeps in his motel room with two prostitutes to the irritation of the drug cartel's handler, Julio (Ignacio Serricchio), who, while seemingly frustrated with Stone's failure to follow the instructed schedule, is plainly jealous of the openly gleeful Stone. Women are either castrating bitches (a word which Stone mutters under his breath to describe his ex-wife Mary when she along with their daughter Iris refuses to attend, if he attends, their granddaughter Ginny's pre-marital party) or prostitutes. No scene is more misogynistic than the party at the palatial home in Mexico of Latón (Andy Garcia), the drug cartel boss, where scantily clad women attend to the men, including two women assigned by Latón to make certain that Stone "enjoys himself." Not surprisingly, at his trial Stone refuses to follow the advice of his lawyer, a woman, and, upon pleading guilty, the judge, also a woman, abruptly remands him to the custody of the U.S. Marshal. If women are equated with family, then women continually threaten Earl Stone's freedom of life on the road, the defining characteristic of his masculinity.

Yet *The Mule* is ultimately critical of Stone's masculinity—both its rewards and the losses that it has entailed. As the movie's promotional slogan succinctly points out in anticipation of Stone's belated acknowledgement of mistakes made, "Nobody runs forever." While based on Dolnick's nonfictional recounting of Leo Sharp's life as a horticulturist and drug courier, *The Mule* is also a fictional tale about Clint Eastwood's life. Commercially successful and widely admired like Sharp, Eastwood has not only won numerous professional awards, including Academy Awards and Lifetime Achievement Awards, but has also maintained his independence, beginning with the formation in 1967 of his own production company, Malpaso. The film is, in part, therefore, about the limitations of that independence and simultaneously a critique of contemporary big business.

The film presents the drug cartel, in particular, as simply another form of big business. Significantly, it's the development of the Internet that kills Stone's horticulture farm known for its daylilies. While the Internet's early advocates, such as John Barlow's "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace" (1996), touted its supposedly libertarian culture, the Internet has become the means for control by a few global companies, such as Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google, and Microsoft. Stone's lack of familiarity with how to operate the smartphone that the drug cartel requires, including his ignorance of texting, and the reason for discarding the phone after each trip, serves as both a source of humor and a commentary on the cartel's operation. There's an irony to Special Agent Bates' mocking insistence that the DEA informer continue to be a "good cartel employee." That both a highway trooper and a cartel enforcer tell Stone at different moments to "drive safely" underscores how law enforcement and the cartel are both businesses. In contrast to Latón, who had appreciated Tata's unpredictability, the cartel lieutenant, who assassinates Latón and assumes power, represents a shift from the cartel as small entrepreneurial business to conglomerate business model. Thus, the new cartel leadership quickly kills off those who resist the cartel's schedules, insisting upon rigid adherence to "freight



Latón, too, learns that it's nothing personal, only business, when his associate unexpectedly murders him from behind.

manifestos” so as to track the cartel’s many shipments. That the DEA is able to track the cartel’s mules and their routes through these “freight manifestos” and then learns of the cartel’s plans by Internet surveillance—intercepting smartphone conversations and using GPS to locate its couriers—reflects how government is simply a larger, more technologically sophisticated business than the cartel, which is only belatedly adopting to a changing, global culture.



The management of the reorganized cartel makes plain to Earl that he must follow exactly its program or face the possible consequences – a body in a trunk



“Let’s make some money!” a gang member enthuses. Earl blankly stares straight ahead.

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Clint Eastwood, as director and actor, both identifies with and distances himself from the character Earl Stone. In response to Special Agent Bates' observation that old people often speak without a filter, Eastwood plainly speaks for himself when his character Stone humorously replies that he "never knew that he had one." On the other hand, the movie is a valedictory reflection upon the values that Eastwood has mythically embodied in movies, the life that's he's lived, and the tension between the two. Eastwood as Stone enjoys charitably distributing his unlawful gains as a courier to a motley group of beneficiaries, including a VFW community center, an ice-skating rink "at the old rec center," and his granddaughter for her wedding and later her cosmetology (or beauty) school tuition. He also personally benefits, paying with cash to buy back his foreclosed farm, replacing his old truck with a fancy Lincoln pick up, and wearing a fancy gold bracelet.

Yet the film undercuts these gestures. As his ex-wife Mary observes in the context of his attending horticultural conventions and speaking engagements at the expense of neglecting his family, these are no more than the efforts of a loner to be at the center of public attention. It's nice to play "Robin Hood." If Eastwood remains well known as a conservative libertarian, positing faith in individual "liberty" and free will, he also acknowledges in *The Mule* Stone's senility, literally stooped over as he walks, observing that he thought that a fellow horticulturist was already dead, and at times nearly uncomprehending of those around him.

Likewise, if Stone, as a character, is racist in his language, typified by the scene in which he calls a black family Negroes even as he's helping them learn how to change a flat tire (given the lack of Internet reception on the highway) and if the plot is racist in depicting all of the Mexican characters as connected to the drug cartel, then *The Mule* also makes plain the cultural institutionalization of this racism. In its effort to identify and find Tata, the DEA, including the protagonist Special Agent Bates, racially profiles car drivers, including one who doesn't speak Spanish, as well as travelers staying at a motel. That the cartel selected Stone, a 90-year old white man with no criminal record and an unblemished driving record, to drive for them underscores this institutionalization. It is apparent, too, in the locals at Shane's Rib Shop who gawk at Julio, Stone's cartel handler, and in the sheriff who with hand on his sidearm asks what Julio's doing in "my town." Tribalism dominates Eastwood's portrait of the United States.



Is it a marketing ploy or Eastwood's need to belatedly reassess that resulted in *The Mule's* LA premiere in which Eastwood's 8 children from his many relationships appeared for the first time publicly with him?

Like the womanizer Earl Stone, exemplified by his bantering with the older women at the horticultural convention, Eastwood has also lived a life “on the road,” wandering through many relationships, both casual and serious, formal and informal, including about 17 years with Sondra Locke, and fathering numerous children with several women.[7] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

While Stone expresses how he’s “sorry for everything” and doesn’t deserve forgiveness, Eastwood grants him only a measure of self-awareness so as to enable Eastwood, as a director, to expose these failings. Thus, for example, if the Mexican drug cartel party consists of the movie cliché of young women sexually available for men at a pool party, Eastwood satirizes the spectacle when the 90-year old Stone lying flat on his back awkwardly cautions the two young women in his room that he may need heart medicine and a cardiologist. Moreover, he unexpectedly then leaves his room to counsel Julio, his handler now alone by the poolside, urging him to quit the drug cartel that cares nothing about him and instead “find something you love to do and then go after it.” When Julio rejects the advice, foolishly claiming that the cartel is his family, with Latón presumably his adoptive father, Eastwood through Stone mocks Julio by telling him that he’s now returning to his room with the two prostitutes where he’s “the center of attention.” The cartel is only another form of business, says Eastwood, and, as such, it’s not family. With the assassination of Latón, Julio becomes simply another unexceptional worker no longer in control of his life. Later telling Stone that he’s not his friend and can expect no help in dealing with the new bosses who now claim to own Stone, Julio disappears from the movie.

There’s an autumnal quality to *The Mule*, similar to such widely diverse films as John Ford’s *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), Ingmar Berman’s *Fanny and Alexander* (1982), and John Houston’s *The Dead* (1987). Eastwood’s seemingly heroic gesture as a movie character is socially useless. Stone’s unscheduled time with Mary as she lies dying in her bed and his attendance at her funeral accomplish nothing—other than a beating by drug cartel enforcers, who are sympathetic to his decision, and a short delay in the DEA’s arrest of Stone. The DEA’s highway arrest of Stone with its overhead helicopter, numerous law enforcement cars, and mock ambulance is likewise anti-climactic, notwithstanding Bates’ claim that it “all comes out right here” and the clichéd close up of Stone’s black leather shoe as Stone steps out of his truck onto the highway in order to surrender. There’s an over-dramatization to the moment when Bates recognizes the old man with whom he spoke earlier at the Pancake House and Stone’s weathered face offering a Clint Eastwood growl and a simple “ya” acknowledging his identity. Earl Stone is Clint Eastwood’s transparent reflection upon his own life.



DEA Agent Bates’ eventual capture of Earl Stone, the drug mule known as Tata, is filled with the dramatic action of a big bust, including a helicopter high overhead, ...



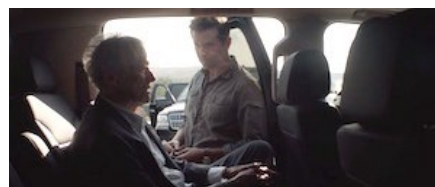
... a highway stakeout, and ...



... guns drawn and pointed at Tata, who walks backwards with arms raised toward the DEA agents. ...



... Yet it’s the face of the old man from the Waffle House breakfast that DEA Agent Bates recognizes and the face with a snarl of an aged Clint Eastwood whom the audience recognizes.



After his arrest, Stone in a DEA vehicle tells Bates how he got to spend time with his wife and how his whole family, including his daughter, let him in. Bates, in turn, acknowledges that Stone was right about work and family.



Confessing that he hasn’t been right about much, Stone reiterates the need to place family first. “You don’t need all that other shit.”

If Stone has chosen his career in daylilies over his family in *The Mule*,

acknowledging to DEA Special Agent Bates that he mistakenly put “work in front of family,” then Clint Eastwood has likewise chosen to act in and direct dozens of movies, beginning in the early 1950s, to the exclusion of all else.



If Eastwood has received numerous film awards, Earl Stone, too, has received awards for his daylilies.

*The Mule*, which Clint Eastwood directed at age 88, is personal. Like Earl Stone, who's spent most of his life raising daylilies, Eastwood has lived a full life, directing about 40 movies and acting in about 72.

There's an obvious symbolism in Stone's choice of daylilies, brightly colored flowers of perennial plants whose name alludes to their opening and withering within the same day, occasionally replaced by other flowers on the same stalk the next day. As Stone explains to Mary, each daylily is unique, blooms for one day and then that's the end of it, thus deserving all of the time that he devotes to each. While Mary replies that the same is true of family, the reference to Eastwood's films is also clear. Like any artist, Eastwood, as actor and director, has spent his life devoted to the creation and nurturing of films that have passed before an





There's no more mythic Western scene than the closing door at the end of John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956).



Eastwood reverses that scene. He allows Earl Stone to enter the home of his ex-wife Mary who's dying of cancer.



For some reason I'm glad you're here, Mary observes.



It's a reconciliation of generations, as Iris, Mary and Earl's daughter, looks on. Alison Eastwood, Clint Eastwood's daughter, plays Iris.

audience and then seemingly disappeared, replaced by the next release. And like many artists, he has regrets at the cost of these creations.

Thus, while Earl calls Mary a "bitch" under his breath, Eastwood makes her the film's conscience. Mary expresses at their daughter Iris' wedding how Earl has always chosen work over family. She tells him at Ginny's pre-marital party that he was never a real father, preferring instead to play with friends and watch his "seeds sprout." And she later calls Earl to task at the wedding. "Why do you think that you can just sit down and expect me to forget about the past and reminisce about old times?" she asks. Significantly, her initial expression of pain, which we later learn is the result of spreading untreated cancer, follows immediately upon Latón's wholly unforeseen assassination. Stone is about to get his "comeuppance...three times filled and running over." [8]

While the movie's narrative is seemingly about Stone's role as a drug cartel mule, its emotional focus is the developing reconciliation of Mary and Earl, culminating in Mary's death scene.[9] Opening himself up to Mary, who's asked where he obtained his money, Earl identifies a series of roles that Eastwood has or might have played—high end gigolo, bounty hunter and drug cartel mule. There's a rawness to Mary's confession that Earl was both the love and pain of her life and that his presence means the world to her. There's a sentimental, yet romantic awkwardness to their last exchange just moments after the audience hears the sounds of Mary's difficulty in drawing breath.

Earl: I love you, Mary.

Mary: More today than yesterday?

Earl: Not as much as tomorrow.

Earl acknowledges at trial this romantic insight, observing how he wants more time but that it's the one thing that he can't buy. And as he earlier observed to DEA Special Agent Bates following his arrest and with music evocative of the ending of *Unforgiven*, "You don't need all that other shit." Like the last shot of *Bronco Billy* in which the camera cranes upward, showing us the circus tent that contains the imaginative life of Bronco Billy and his makeshift family, the last shot of *The Mule* takes us upward, disclosing Earl Stone tending his daylilies behind the barbed wire and fencing of a federal prison and then disappearing from view. [10] There's a momentary tenderness, a fragility, to Stone's tale, but there's simultaneously a barely perceptible darkness at the center of Eastwood's life as it draws to a close. At its best and worst, life is a series of choices, and in the end, as William Munny observed, "It's a hell of a thing...Take away all he's got and all he's ever gonna' have." Eastwood acknowledges the gaping void that no amount of filmmaking can fill. And "deserve's got nothin' to do with it."



How did you come into all that money? Mary asks. Earl replies by identifying roles that Eastwood has or could have played – high end gigolo, bounty hunter and drug cartel mule.



Iris tells her dad how her mom never gave up on him, growing daylilies in her backyard, as well as forgives him, telling him that he's a late bloomer. She lets in him.



As we hear Mary's death rattle, Earl romantically confesses his love for her now and tomorrow.



Daylilies blossom and die in one day. And "deserve's got nothin' to do with it."

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## Notes

1. Sam Dolnick's "There's a True Story Behind 'The Mule': The Sinaloa Cartel's 90-Year-Old Drug Mule," *The NY Times Magazine*, June 11, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/15/magazine/the-sinaloa-cartels-90-year-old-drug-mule.html>. [return to page 1]

2. Dolnick's article is extraordinarily detailed in its depiction of Sharp. For example, the article describes how Sharp stopped at a Steak 'n Shake restaurant to order French fries and an Orange Freeze milkshake on the day of his highway arrest. It also tells how Sharp's truck, in which the troopers found five duffel bags filled with 104 kilos of cocaine, was "a mess — the back seat was covered by a mound of food wrappers, cheese-puff bags, half-eaten sandwiches, crumpled newspapers, a milk bottle and an old bag of golf clubs." The article reads like a short story or screenplay, such as in the following description of Sharp's arrest:

"The driver was wearing a plaid shirt with khaki pants, white socks and brown shoes. His hair was unkempt, his gait uncertain. He was unshaven and had thick white mutton chops. He carried his glasses with both hands and cupped his ear at the trooper's instructions. He looked old enough to be [State Trooper] Ziecina's grandfather."

'What's going on, officer?' the man asked. 'At age 87, I want to know why I'm being stopped.'"

3. For example, in designating two stars to *The Mule*, Christy Lemire concluded her review with the following observation:

"There's also an icky, creeping sensation of xenophobia that permeates the film...Casually racist, he refers to blacks and Hispanics in good-naturedly antiquated terms. But then all the Mexicans he works for are scary, gun-toting criminals who want to bring drugs into our country, and many of them are depicted in stereotypical fashion with shaved heads and neck tats. They're taking advantage of Earl, a hardworking Korean War veteran who's seen the American Dream collapse beneath him.

Earl is Trump's proverbial Forgotten Man: Elderly, white and living in the Heartland, he listens to country music and longs for a simpler time before the Internet complicated everything... ----RogerEbert.com, Dec. 14, 2018, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-mule-2018>.

Other commentators were simply ageist in their critique of the movie, such as the "Weekend Update" skit of *Saturday Night Live* in which Pete Davidson and John Mulaney repeatedly mocked the absurdity of a 90-year old who still drives and engages in "two threesomes" with young women and then characterize Eastwood's movie character as a "superhero for old people." Weekend Update: Pete Davidson & John Mulaney Review Clint Eastwood's *The Mule* – SNL, January 19, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=1&v=X5TEsdb918c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=X5TEsdb918c).

The "critical consensus" on Rotten Tomatoes reads as follows: "A flawed yet enjoyable late-period Eastwood entry, *The Mule* stubbornly retains its footing



despite a few missteps on its occasionally unpredictable path.”

[https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the\\_mule\\_2018](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_mule_2018).

4. In designating the film a “critic’s pick”, Manohla Dargis of *The NY Times* summed up the generally positive view of *Gran Torino* in writing: “Mr. Eastwood is...an adept director of his own performances and, perhaps more important, a canny manipulator of his own iconographic presence.” Manohla Dargis’ “Hope for a Racist, and Maybe a Country”, *The New York Times*, December 11, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/12/movies/12tori.html>.

Dargis was far less enthusiastic in her review of *The Mule*, observing:

“[T]he story shifts and lumbers toward redemption that Earl doesn’t earn and that sentimentalizes a movie that is never especially good and often teasingly offensive but also fitfully entertaining and willfully perverse...These moments [of “abusive language” and “social pieties”] may make you laugh or wince or both. But because the movie never builds to something greater than its parts, Eastwood ends up blowing raspberries and floundering for meaning in a void.”

Manhohla Dargis’ “‘The Mule’ Review: Clint Eastwood’s Very Strange Drug Trip”, *The New York Times*, December 13, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/13/movies/the-mule-review.html>.

5. Clint Eastwood’s comment to the author at the Annual Gala of the Museum of the Moving Image in 2009 honoring Eastwood.

6. Sondra Locke (née Sandra Louise Smith, later adopting the married name Sandra Louise Anderson) died on November 3, 2018, but the announcement of her death was not widely publicized until December 13, 2018. See, for example, Julia Jacobs, “Sondra Locke, 74, Is Dead; Oscar-Nominated Actress,” *The NY Times*, December 13, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/13/obituaries/sondra-locke-dead.html> (“Her death, which was not widely reported at the time, was caused by cardiac arrest related to brain and bone cancer, The Associated Press reported on Thursday, citing a death certificate.”). *The Mule* opened in the United States on December 14, 2018.

7. Eastwood may have fathered eight children, and supposedly all of them appeared on stage with him at the premiere for *The Mule*, including one daughter whom he had refused to acknowledge as his child. See Bonnie Fuller’s “Clint Eastwood, 88, Shocks Fans As He’s Pictured With ‘Secret Daughter’ & His 8 Kids At Premiere,” *Hollywood Life*, Dec. 11, 2018, <https://hollywoodlife.com/2018/12/11/clint-eastwood-secret-daughter-kids-the-mule-premiere-pics-photos/>; Bryan Brunati’s “Clint Eastwood Hits The Red Carpet With His Adult Kids — Meet The 8 Eastwood Children!,” *Closer Weekly*, Dec. 14, 2018, <https://www.closerweekly.com/posts/clint-eastwoods-kids-meet-the-8-eastwood-children/>; and Lizzie Smith and Anneta Konstantinides’ “Clint Eastwood, 88, pictured for the first time with ‘secret daughter’ Laurie as all EIGHT children support him at The Mule premiere,” *Daily Mail*, Jan. 9, 2019, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-6484713/Clint-Eastwood-pictured-time-secret-daughter-Laurie.html>. [return to page 2]

8. This partial quote is from Orson Welles’ *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) about the decline and fall of the pre-industrial Amberson family, in particular, its egotistical heir, George Amberson Minafer (Tim Holt). The complete quotation is as follows:

“Something had happened, a thing which years ago had been the eagerest hope of many, many good citizens of the town. And now it came at last: George Amberson Minafer had got his comeuppance. He’d got it three times filled and running over. But those who had longed for it were not there to see it. And they never knew it, those

who were still living had forgotten all about it, and all about him.”

9 John Ford mythologized the male hero’s mourning for the death of a loved one in the graveyard scenes of such films as *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* and *The Searchers*. While there’s no graveyard scene in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, its entire narrative turns on the placement by an aged Hallie Stoddard ((Vera Miles) of a cactus flower on the coffin of Tom Doniphon (John Wayne). Eastwood renewed that image in such films as *Unforgiven* and *Trouble with the Curve*.

While Robert Lorenz is identified as the director (and producer) of *Trouble with the Curve*, *Trouble with the Curve* is the only film that Lorenz has directed. He has otherwise consistently produced films beginning in 2002 that Eastwood has directed. Interestingly, like many Eastwood-directed films, *Trouble with the Curve* focuses on a father (Eastwood)-daughter (Amy Adams) relationship, but in contrast to *The Mule*, it concludes with Adams, in effect, rejecting her successful law career and adopting instead a career in professional baseball, where Eastwood has become a legendary scout. Moreover, also in contrast to *The Mule*, Eastwood’s years of estrangement from his daughter is explained by the self-serving story of how he barely saved her from being molested and hence his desire to shelter her from his own type of marginal life.

10. The ending also recalls the ending of *Morgan!* (1966). Morgan (David Warner), the main character, who was raised as a Communist by his working-class parents and is a failed artist, is committed to an insane asylum as a result of his uncontrollable fantasy life (causing him to commit a series of bizarre stunts to woo back his ex-wife). He is last seen in a long shot arranging flowers in the shape of a hammer and sickle.

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## On affect and criticality in Steve McQueen's *Widows*

by [William J. Simmons](#)



Toyin Ojih Odutola, *A Solitary Pursuit*, 2017-18, charcoal, pastel and pencil on paper, 30 x 40 inches (sheet), 35 3/8 x 45 1/4 x 1 1/2 inches (framed). © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. [\[Click on picture to see large.\]](#)

Ojih Odutola, like Steve McQueen, uses realism and fantasy simultaneously, expanding thereby the interpretational options open to the Black figures she depicts. Drawing, for most of art history's life as an academic discipline, has always carried with it an assumption of truth that opposes the chromatic excesses inherent to painting. Still, Ojih Odutola uses drawing in a quasi-mythological way, creating worlds and narratives that embrace the spectacular and the mundane.

"Black stories can be ridiculous. Black stories can be silly. They can be problematic. They can be mediocre and remarkable. They can be boring. Can we have that privilege now? Instead of having to be exceptional all the time?"

— Toyin Ojih Odutola [1]

[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

In the concluding scene of Steve McQueen's *Widows* (2018), one protagonist and another, whose stories I will get to in a moment, meet unexpectedly after some time apart. These protagonists are both women. One of them is Black and one is white. The white woman leaves a lunch date and readies to get back into her car, but the camera swivels slowly and methodically backwards to reveal the Black woman standing there with an empathetic, but slightly apprehensive look on her face. After all, with the trauma they have both experienced, it may be harder to talk to someone from the past than spending the rest of their lives craving that camaraderie again. I originally misremembered that the Black woman waves, but instead she just says "Alice," and we hear no response. We imagine that one might have come, but the credits get in the way. Though the Black woman does not wave as I had thought, she nevertheless asserts herself, makes herself materially present in the life of her former (white) colleague. Describing this final moment, the script for *Widows* (co-written by McQueen and Gillian Flynn) reads:

"Veronica's expression is one of guarded recognition. She is reaching out." [2]

She does not wave, but she reaches out. She knows perhaps that the genre she inhabits has relegated black women (in a way very different than white women or black men) to a state of unintelligibility that precludes her from being either a *femme fatale* we fear or a heroine with which we identify—indeed a woman at all. Instead, she will not fade away into history or narrative and instead maintains through a look and an implied gesture that she will persist in both the thrilling and action-packed past of the story and in the real sociopolitical arena outside of the darkened theatre.





Alice (Elizabeth Debicki) prepares to leave the café without acknowledging Veronica (Viola Davis), perhaps unwilling to revisit the traumatic experience of the heist.



McQueen's camera swirls backward toward Veronica, indicating a vastness of time and space, and, in its dissolution of the image into abstraction, becomes a gesture akin to a brushstroke.



Veronica is cautious about “reaching out” to Alice, but any guardedness comes with a compelling empathy that is manifest in her facial expression.

That gesture of acknowledgment becomes the corporeal link between the film's past and present, which are both our own present, and we see time condense before our eyes. The knowing glance or wave is a filmic cliché endemic to melodrama, and yet each time those bodily expressions remain compelling as e/motions that both signal a return to order and remind us of all the transgressions and thrills that occurred prior to it. The “knowing” ending is also a call to action, to remember the possibilities afforded by the filmic narrative that could translate into “real” interventions or a realization of the pure fantasy of those longed-for interventions. We remember all that these characters accomplished together and the hardships that they overcame, even as we mourn the dailiness with which they must comport themselves now that the film has reached its falling action. Moreover, that knowing look accomplishes an empathetic muting of emotion in a narrative that, in the tradition of melodrama and *film noir* (which were originally synonyms, e.g. “crime melodrama”), has been marked by emotional extremes, by grand inquiries into morality and the ongoing discourse of the individual verses crushing social forces that are both external to and played out within the protagonists. It follows that a sobering glance is both melodramatically poignant and an indication of a (perhaps begrudging) commitment to realism inasmuch as it reminds us of the tension between melodrama and everyday life.



The widows exist collectively, but their individual socioeconomic circumstances are central to McQueen's story. In some way, he makes clear that only the fantasy/narrative binds them, and when the heist ends, there is no reason for sustained contact in the “real world.”

Perhaps most importantly in the context of *Widows*, the “reaching out” is an assertion by the Black protagonist that she is a part of the film's realist aspirations, its partial return to normalcy with all its drudgery and possibilities for newness, even as she is equally integral to the romance and car chases that mark a world of fantasy. She persists as both simultaneously—not liminal or oscillating,

but rather fully both at the same time. She is moreover fully in control of that interspace, using her gesturality as a way of grounding herself and claiming filmic space.

Indeed, persistence is perhaps the quintessential theme of *Widows*, as is the potential of occupying multiple racialized and gendered emotional/viewing positions. Melodrama and *film noir* tend to have persistence at their core generally, so one could say that *Widows* is an appropriation of the thematic conditions of these genres for the 21st century and in a non-white-male context. The film is itself an act of appropriation that centers on the persistence of McQueen's childhood fascination with the British TV drama of the same name from the mid-1980s.

The film follows four women in Chicago whose husbands are killed in a failed robbery and begins with a passionate kiss between Veronica (Viola Davis) and her husband Harry (Liam Neeson).[3] After Harry's death, she is threatened for the money he stole, so she teams up with Linda (Michelle Rodriguez), Alice (Elizabeth Debicki), and Belle (Cynthia Erivo) to steal \$5 million to clear their debts (and perhaps, for some of them, to sustain the legacy of their husbands, no matter how checkered that legacy might be). Imbricated within the widows' plan is a political power struggle between a white incumbent in a South Side election (Colin Farrell) and his Black challenger (Brian Tyree Henry). The film proceeds with a compelling combination of humor and pathos, and finally the satisfying completion of a successful heist.

However, in a perfectly melodramatic twist that is characteristic of the *film noir* genre, it turns out that Veronica's husband was alive the whole time. He planned to kill her and steal the money back so that he could run off with his mistress. Veronica kills him in self-defense. We therefore understand her tentative assumption of the role of a *femme fatale* to be justified and not based in greed or aspiration, and the foregrounding of her sexuality at the beginning of the film does not become a prediction of a punishing sexuality in the tradition of the *femme fatale*.



Veronica does kill her husband in the tradition of the *femme fatale*, but we do not understand it as vengeance or castration. Instead, in a melodramatic fashion, we are swept up into an emotional space characterized by female virtue, which has often been denied to women of color. Interestingly, here Veronica and McQueen appeal to the white/Western art historical tradition of the *pietà*.

It is not clear that the other widows learn of Veronica's tragic choice, but, in any case with the heist completed, they each make new lives for themselves—traumatized certainly, but wiser, as often is the case with films offering some kind of sentimental return to order—and they go their separate ways, at least until the chance meeting between Veronica and Alice with which I began. Belle gives her



Belle secretly gives her money to a friend whose financial precarity threatens her hair salon. This gesture indicates a knowledge by Belle/McQueen of an intimate part of Black life (based on touch and gesturality) that, in some ways, cannot be translated across lines of racial and socioeconomic difference.



Linda reclaims the store that was liquidated to pay her husband's debts. Her children, now fatherless, begin to play, indicating the cautious hopefulness we might have via the melodramatic appeal to progeny. Of course, Veronica's child was murdered by the police, and his memory lives on in a different way. Structural racism makes it likely that Linda's store will again become financially precarious (I owe this last point to Felipe L. Núñez).



Alice has lunch with a girlfriend, and therefore seems, at least in this moment, outside the control of men, which has characterized most of her storyline in the film.



money to a struggling friend who owns a black hair salon. Linda opens her own store in her own name. Alice finds self-fulfillment without the intervention of men. Veronica donates her money to the local public school in honor of her son who was murdered by the police.

Social commentary and anti-racist activism certainly are major components of McQueen's work, but what we need to remember about *Widows* and other films by and about non-white and/or non-male individuals is that social engagement should not equate their work with a documentary status or be a requirement for our enjoyment and engagement with those films. What characterizes *Widows* in addition to its revolutionary attention to non-white-male stories is an interest in allowing those stories to be told through visual pleasure and through the at times irrational emotional configurations afforded by melodrama and *film noir*. Of course, associating people of color and/or women with irrationality is a tactic of the racist heteropatriarchy, but what I mean to suggest here is that *Widows* cannot be equated with a documentary-esque performance of racism and/or sexism in heist movies, melodrama, or *film noir*. While it does accomplish the critical task of making visible how melodrama and *film noir* focus on white bodies and white stories (often making people of color objectified accessories in the process), the film also sites visual pleasure and complex, problematic even, attachments at its foundation. After all, the film begins with a kiss that quickly cuts to a scene of violence, indicating the pleasure and danger of any erotic-filmic relationship.

Perhaps we could therefore also use the term narrative desire as formulated by the queer historian of literature Joseph Boone, who argues for a relationship to the text that exhibits both a desire for narrative and a desire to disidentify with the narratives imposed by deconstruction or critique.[4] To understand *Widows* as an enjoyable movie by an artist of color with fantastic visuals and acting would require the qualifiers of "merely" and "just" to imply that the seasoned critic or the properly deconstructive observer should be looking for the ways in which the film exceeds conventionality, visual pleasure, or the historically congealed markers of genre in order to find a meaning more sophisticated than enjoyment. I wonder if allowing McQueen to exist in a dialectic or even a provisionally non-oppositional space with regard to genre and problematic cultural tropes might be a useful exercise. This is not to say that we can reduce *Widows* purely to the essentialist pleasures afforded by these genres, but rather to explore the possibility of minoritarian artists existing in both pleasurable and critical ways to the conventions of genre and to the histories of art and film themselves.

Indeed, *Widows* seeks not to solve the racist history of film and its reception, and perhaps it does not even seek always to deconstruct those discourses, at least in the conventional academic sense. Deconstruction is often another burden we foist upon artists of color anyway, who, in addition to theorizing themselves, must also always bear the burden of theorizing difference [for the benefit of white people]. It is no mistake that Michele Wallace, via Stuart Hall, argues that postmodernism (and the deconstructive apparatus it implies) is itself an appropriation of marginalized temporalities and lives.[5] *Widows*, in its gendered and racialized appropriations, reminds us of this critical hegemony without fully detaching from the analytical pleasures and possibilities it provides.

In his recent book *Stolen Life*, Fred Moten takes the Black gesture, the Black "reaching out," as the impetus for his critique of Linda Williams's foundational text on melodrama *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson*. Williams foregrounds her text with a consideration of how O.J. Simpson's trial, itself drenched in melodramatic conventions, engendered a melodrama within her own mind centered on her racialized/racist discomfort with the trial's outcome. Williams takes special note of visible gestures as exemplary of the corporeal legibility of melodrama in a racialized context:



Linda Williams's discussion of O.J. Simpson and the Black power gesture is interesting in terms of the seriousness with which it takes melodramatic spectacle, but it assumes too much about the interiority (or lack thereof) of the Black figures she discusses.



It is no mistake that the Black power fist has been melodramatized in the recent TV series *American Crime Story: The People v. O.J. Simpson*. Ryan Murphy, the creator of *American Crime Story*, has also revitalized a queer interest in the melodramatic, though, I think, to less progressive ends than McQueen.

“Viewers could thus observe the way Simpson exhaled and half smiled, the way Johnny Cochran, standing behind him, first slapped his shoulder and then rested the side of his head against it; the way, in another view, Kim Goldman, sister of Ron Goldman, let out a howl of pain, and finally, in a gesture of “raced demeanor” that was not seen by the television camera but was much commented on by the media, the way one black juror, upon exiting the courtroom, raised his fist in what some interpreted as a black power salute and others saw simply as the pleasure of being set free.”[6]

Williams thus understands this gesture performed by a Black body as something both illegible and self-explanatory, something akin to her own admitted ambivalence in response to the verdict handed down in the O.J. Simpson trial. Moten, however, takes the raised fist much more seriously as an indication of an inability on Williams’s part to assign intentionality to the Black body in her theorization of racial melodrama. Moten argues:

“More specifically, part of what compels Williams to examine the history of racial melodrama is that a black male juror in the O. J. Simpson criminal trial raised his fist—in relief and/or triumph and/or thanks—when the jury was dismissed upon the reading of the verdict. As if the gesture were evident of something that is, in turn, so self-evident as not to require either mention or elucidation, as if its presumed bad taste were directly linked to a failure, or even absence, of moral reasoning, Williams recites but does not comment on it.”[7]

Moten’s assignment of what might initially seem like an undue amount of emotional investment (as we have all experienced when our melodramatic connection to a certain character in a movie is questioned) in the fist (or the Black gesture generally) actually connects to what he sees as a more pervasive problem in Williams’s text. She seems focused on an inherently conservative rights-based discourse (unlike Berlant and others who have critiqued citizenship itself) and is unable to theorize Blackness vis-à-vis melodrama beyond it being a metaphor for self-making through suffering. Moten also notes a blatant apolitical stance in Williams’s book which he sees as coextensive with an inability or unwillingness to theorize what Black resistance might look like in the racist (not just “raced”) and melodramatic landscape outlined in the text.

So, Moten charts that path of resistance by returning to the text that germinated studies of melodrama, Peter Brooks’s *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, quoting the moment wherein Brooks rehearses the liminal and spiritual possibilities of melodrama via a racist metaphor found in Denis Diderot’s “Eloge de Richardson.” Diderot, in his melodramatic praise of the proto-melodramatist Samuel Richardson, describes Richardson as a kind of guide who leads us through the dark spaces of our emotional lives. According to Diderot, Richardson “spirits away the mighty phantom which guards the entrance to the cavern [so that] the hideous blackamoor which it masks stands revealed.”[8] Brooks quotes Diderot in his volume thusly:

“The desacralization and sentimentalization of ethics leads us—as Diderot discovered in reading Richardson—into ‘the recesses of the cavern,’ there to discover ‘the hideous Moor’ hidden in our motives and desires.”[9]

Brooks makes no mention of the racial implications of this passage, and one wonders why he includes the “the hideous blackamoor” at all. Moten, like Toni Morrison, argues that Blackness always represents always a metaphor of transgression for the white, racist imagination, which transforms Blackness into a vehicle for white meaning, rather than a material, affective, and discursive way of being in the world and relating to hegemonic and non-hegemonic culture.[10]

With this history in mind, Moten unseats the centering of whiteness exhibited by Diderot, Brooks, and Williams by allowing melodrama to exist in a state of both fantasy and realism, implying that there can be multiple ways of identifying or disidentifying with the problematics of the genre:

“Therefore, one way to think of blackness-as-abolitionism is as the site where madness and melos converge. It’s the site of a kind of unruly music that moves in disruptive, improvisational excess—as opposed to a kind of absencing negation—of the very idea of the (art)work, and it is also the site of a certain lawless, fugitive theatricality, something on the order of that drama that Zora Neale Hurston argues is essential to black life.”[11]

Melodrama becomes a metaphor for thinking about the interiority that Moten argues has been excluded from the racial and filmic imaginary as theorized by Williams and Brooks, as well as a way of taking apart the sanctity of the art object, and by extension the essentialisms of Enlightenment rights-based discourses. The melodramatic gesture, embodied by the raised fist at O.J. Simpson’s trial, becomes an agent of interruption that insists on the vast inner life of minoritarian subjects that resonates infinitely in the problematic, but useful, study of melodrama. We might thus be able to consider more deeply how individual and cultural affects are formed via spectacles of the moving image. All of this is accomplished exactly because of the prominence of racialized visual and narrative codes in melodrama and especially *film noir* with their foregrounding of class struggle and metaphors of darkness. Melodrama becomes emblematic of the



Veronica allows herself to fall into melodramatic

gesturality only once—a momentary burst of sorrow that she quickly buries.

range of feeling not afforded to people of color, whose representational outlets have often been confined to an either/or system of critique or complacency. And finally, racial melodrama is simultaneously not just a critical lens or rhetorical device, as Williams used it, but rather a fantastical emotional matrix that intersects equally with the lived experiences of people of color. Recall, in this vein, the centrality of the Black hair salon to the film's conclusion and McQueen's elevation of the mundane into a site of melodramatic identification, as Toni Morrison did before him in works like *Jazz* (1992).

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Sissy (Carey Mulligan) performs “New York, New York” in McQueen’s *Shame*—a moment that remains inexplicably moving, even as it appeals to melodramatic conventions (e.g. the lounge singer, made interesting again by David Lynch). The melancholy here weighs down the air, and we begin to foresee the tragic fates of the protagonists.



The climax of *Shame* finds Brandon (Michael Fassbender) screaming into the rain. By itself, this scene might seem hackneyed, but the visual and narrative progression enacted by the scene engenders a profound sympathy—if not for Brandon, then certainly for his fragile sister. We must wonder, however, how much of our sympathy has to do with the whiteness of these characters?



The realism of *12 Years a Slave*, as Erica L. Ball argues, takes the film out of the realm of melodramatic spectacle, as with this scene, wherein McQueen’s insistence on materiality allows no sentimentality to enter into his

If, following Moten, a Black engagement with melodrama can act as an expansive force that uses the genre as an indication of a multifaceted imaginary despite or because of its limitations, it is important to consider how *Widows* operated for many critics as a metric for how well a Black filmmaker did or did not exceed the conventions of genre. Indeed, the language surrounding *Widows* was often one of a transcendence of or adherence to genre, which is not insignificant given Brooks’s spiritual examination of the “beyond” afforded by melodrama, and, as we will see later, the same language used by Roland Barthes. In a preview for the film, a journalist comments:

“Widows is the *12 Years a Slave* filmmaker’s first heist movie, but he hopes the film’s exploration of race relations, class disparities, and police shootings in Chicago transcends the tropes of the genre.”[12] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

Still, some felt that the film actually inhabited the tropes of white feminism that become useless clichés to women of color (this essay is wonderfully and coincidentally paranoid with its title “Widows’ Isn’t the Feminist Triumph You Think It Is,” implying that McQueen is, at least genre-wise, pulling one over on us):

“But as the women talk themselves into pulling off a \$5 million heist, their dialogue starts to read like promotional materials for the newest brand of Feminism Lite.”[13]

The author is in many ways entirely correct, and it is no mistake that scholars like Manthia Diawara have also critiqued the reception of *film noir* as a whole for its privileging of (likewise paranoid) white feminist methodologies.[14]

In another negative review, a critic writes:

“It’s not clear exactly what kind of movie(s) *Widows* wants to be: feminist heist thriller? Sprawling political saga? Bare-knuckled gangster noir?”[15]

The willingness of McQueen and *Widows* to occupy each of these spaces has been seen as either revolutionary or clichéd, and critics seem invested in policing the degree to which a film (by a Black artist) can be said to reinforce or disrupt the time/space of genre. It is no mistake, then, that, as Williams argues, transcendence of genre is often central to the reception of melodrama:

“Typically, when an emotionally powerful work is deemed good it is seen to ‘transcend’ melodrama; when not, it is inevitably the melodrama that prevents it from being so. According to this system it is rarely possible to invoke melodrama as the source of a work’s power unless this melodrama is judged ironic or what film scholars like to call ‘Sirkian.’”[16]

It is therefore in line with melodrama’s reception history that critics and reviewers often express a desire for McQueen’s films to exist simultaneously within and beyond the confines of clichéd genres or to critique the film exactly for that reluctance to choose. The repeated evaluation of *Widows* based on genre conventions is especially interesting given Moten’s critique of Williams’s characterization of the illegibility of the raised fist. In a sense, Blackness must always deal forcefully and dangerously with the legibility that characterizes genre, which leads to an even more complicated relationship between Black artists and

presentation of lynching.



Likewise, in this scene, Solomon (Chiwetel Ejiofor) must stand on his tiptoes in order to avoid dying by hanging. The scene's durationality is brutal, adding to Ball's argument for McQueen's unsentimental realism.



Veronica's son Marcus is murdered by the police during a traffic stop. He reaches out for something in his car, and he is subsequently shot.



At the film's conclusion, Veronica "reaches out" once again by giving her share of the stolen money to Marcus's school in his honor. She thus desires to turn a gesture into a concrete memorial, something permanent that will outlive her own story.



Here, McQueen refers to the forbidden Black gesturality exposed by the Black Lives Matter movement. We might also recall also the racialized violence of touch enacted in *12 Years a Slave*.

filmic conventions that might go unnoticed for white artists.

Now, all genre films imply or intimate an assessment of whether or not they conform to or trouble the conventions with which they are associated, which is the basis of critique. This fact is especially germane to the study of melodramatic genres, which Brooks understands as necessarily intertwined with critique:

"The only way in which I find myself able to make sense of melodrama as a sense-making system is through the act of interpretation itself, through the discovery of meaning and its particular coördinates, which means that melodrama is recaptured and understood only insofar as it can be touched by my own critical gesture." [17]

In some ways, therefore, melodrama requires for its very existence a relationship to criticality and interpretation. Brooks argues that, as with many manifestations of genre, any form only exists by virtue of the critical scrutiny that outlines its shape (that outline, as Diawara, Morrison, and others have argued, is often the metaphor of blackness). Yet in the context of melodrama, that willingness takes on a particular tenor, since it is ruled by metaphor and indeed a paranoia wherein, according to Brooks,

"everything appears to bear the stamp of meaning, which can be expressed, pressed out, from it." [18]

Melodrama therefore bears the invitation to critique and deconstruction despite (or because of) its promulgation of certain essentialist narratives and visual cues that would themselves be unacceptable to a student of deconstruction. That critique, to use Brooks's turn-of-phrase, can be expressly marked on the body, implying a violence that resonates differently for subjects of color. In a way, therefore, McQueen's non-white and/or non-male gesturality could be seen as a way of dislodging that stamp, or returning affective agency to his characters to accept that mark of meaning, or to reject it.

Melodrama thus becomes a genre (albeit a contested and provisional one) not only of belief, but also of the paranoia associated with the practice of critique. Of course, as Moten shows in his reading of Brooks and Williams, a racialized Other is central to that paranoia in the discourse on melodrama—the inscrutable, frightening figure who guards the entrance to our most beautiful and terrifying emotions. In the paranoid mode, we anxiously and incessantly request that art proves itself not only pleasurable but also worthy of our critical attention. Paranoia represents a chance to stave off embarrassment, disappointment, or danger by mining objects of culture until every possible meaning is exhausted—there can be nothing surprising that has not already been theorized *ad nauseum* or something problematic whose connections to oppressive power structures have yet to be denuded. To disengage with the academic conventions of critique is to appear un-woke or uninformed, since, according to Sedgwick,

"In a world where no one need be delusional to find evidence of systemic oppression, to theorize out of anything *but* a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naïve, pious, or complacent." [19]

Indeed, naivety, piety, and complacency are all terms that have been used to describe melodrama, and scholars have responded by lending a degree of seriousness to it by considering how it exceeds the limits of genre.

An important illustration of an approach that counters these binary models of melodramatic reception that is both oppositional and empathetic to the multiple ways of inhabiting a non-white-male visual pleasure is an essay by Wanda Coleman from 1993. In it, she expresses a simultaneous love for and revulsion toward *film noir*. She begins her essay with an evocative process of taking stock of the thrilling (but clichéd) conventions of *film noir*: "Our hero/anti-hero is a private eye, ex-Marine or flyboy, transient good-Joe-gone-bad, prizefighter on the



In *Hunger*, we see a literal diminishing of the body—a material and “real” wasting away (perhaps even an end to gesturality) that has one foot in a documentary status. Yet, McQueen remains committed to the fantastical, as with his protagonist’s surreal demise.



The conversation between Bobby (Michael Fassbender) and Father Dominic (Liam Cunningham) frames the shot and does not deviate from it, creating a durational scene not unlike the hanging in *12 Years a Slave*. There is a sense that the stasis is both “real” and somehow too still and placid. This creates a disjoint wherein one experiences reality and surreality simultaneously.

skids, gigolo in vicuna, a mug with a heart of goo” and so on.[20] The nature of list-making does not detract from the thrill that we understand Coleman to take in these stereotypes. Their magic does not lose their luster until Coleman writes: “Uh oh,’ I say, ‘here comes one of us.”[21] She goes on:

“Someone black has suddenly appeared onscreen. My stomach tightens and I feel the rage start to rise. My psyche is caught behind the metaphorical door, slammed on my temporary exit from reality. It hurts. At such jarring moments it takes all my strength to resist zapping the TV set. Instead, I reach down into my ‘willing suspension of disbelief.’ It’s only make-believe, my mantra. To enjoy that sentimental journey back to yesteryear, I have to pretend I live in a perfect world. I have to accept the isms that go with film noir turf. I have to force myself back through the door, back into the movie.”[22]

Coleman’s poetic analysis of this dialectic situation strangely evokes the language of cave-guarding found in Brooks and Diderot. Coleman narrates a feeling of a forced division between pleasure and the knowledge of the cruel optimism of that pleasure—a space that is not binary, but rather moving within and among an earnest and critical relationship to *film noir* stereotypes. Here, Blackness does not guard that interior space of fantasy as in Brooks and Diderot, but is instead forced out of it—a constant reminder of the white imaginary’s inability to allow for a non-white visual pleasure. Yet Coleman does not detach from this racist spectacle, as some might expect her to. We might recall here Sedgwick on the possibility of loving compromised or problematic objects of culture as a survival tactic:

“I think that for many of us [queer people] in childhood the ability to attach intently to a few cultural objects, objects of high or popular culture or both, objects whose meanings seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us, became a prime resource for survival. We needed for there to be sites where meanings didn’t line up tidily with each other, and we learned to invest those sites with fascination and love.”[23]

In a queer fashion, Coleman likewise insists on loving a racist genre without discounting its racist nature. We might also remember that *Widows* emerged from McQueen’s own childhood love for a popular television show that has since become mysterious indeed since it is rather difficult to watch and not available for streaming.

It is no mistake, moreover, that *Widows* deals with an identification with the oft-degraded arena of women’s culture, which, as Lauren Berlant has argued, represents a constellation of regressive and progressive desires that is specifically attuned to the problematics of attachment:

“Thus to love conventionality is not only to love something that constrains someone or some condition of possibility: it is another way of talking about negotiating belonging to a world. To love a thing is not only to embrace its most banal iconic forms, but to work those forms so that individuals and populations can breathe and thrive in them or in proximity to them.”[24]

Of course, this is not to say that there is liberating potential in all conventional forms, since, as Berlant makes clear, women’s culture and the creation of intimate publics had and has everything to do with promulgating a white and hetero-patriarchal universalism that erases the necessary differences that exist among women. Berlant instead utilizes language centered on degrees of nearness and distance, rather than a binary evocation of conventional/unconventional, complicit/avant-garde, leading ultimately to her wondering what counterpublics that cannot be purely interpolated as institutional critique would look like, allowing thereby for at least a curiosity about what happens when non-hegemonic individuals detach from the political and find respite in the personal or



sentimental.[25] It could be that the widows' heist is, paradoxically, exactly that respite, because it pleasurably (at least for the viewer) suspends the sociopolitical circumstances of the women for a moment, even though the heist becomes retroactively political when the stolen money is used to memorialize a Black teen murdered by the police and to help a Black woman pay off the debts on her salon, for example.

Coleman's and Berlant's poetic ambivalences are generative ways to consider *Widows* as both within and beyond the fantasies of *film noir* and melodrama, but also within and beyond conventions of critique and aesthetic activism that imply a statement about collective politics. It is indeed true that McQueen takes the conventional thriller and addresses Coleman's ambivalent representational concerns, not the least because of his centering of non-white-male protagonists, and he holds up the genre film as a useful and problematic site for both pleasure and critique. Still, there is something uncomfortable in the fact that the gendered and racial newness of *Widows* has been understood in a paranoid fashion as *proof* of its quality, which is an uneasy position. As Mary Ann Doane has argued, that sociological impulse can represent a desire to displace the burden of realism or documentary onto non-white bodies:

“White theorists have historically monopolized the operation of abstraction, displacing the characteristics of discreteness, particularity, and concreteness onto racial others.”[26]

There is thus a paradoxical expectation of *Widows* being particular in one sense and transcendent in another. If it is true, as we have seen, that the melodramatic mode can be understood as both an inherently critical and an inherently complicit way of organizing the filmic imaginary, it might be useful to allow *Widows* to derive its importance not only from its quasi-spiritual transcendence of genre, but also from its longing to reconfigure the imaginary (yet semi-structured) worlds that genre allows for inhabitation by non-white, non-male protagonists and fantasies.

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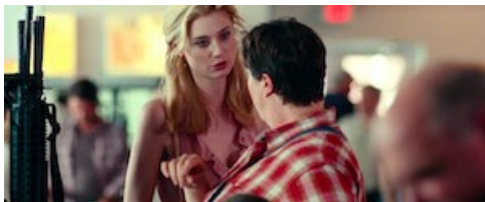
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# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Alice's (Elizabeth Debicki) trip to the gun show is a disarmingly funny moment that brings together

Yet an insistence on a deconstructive intent pervades the discourse on McQueen's work, and it is coupled with a focus on realism. In a more squarely art historical context, Jean Fisher writes:

"To date, McQueen's strategy has been to disclose an often-concealed documentary fact through the medium of aesthetic affect with the aim of prising open a space of discussion between mediated fiction and experienced reality." [27] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

In effect, this is a very wordy way of saying that McQueen's work is deconstructive, that it seeks to expose (recalling the racist metaphor of the blackamoor guarding the cave) some sort of truth in the inherently fantastical medium of cinema. That documentary fact in McQueen's work has often been read as a raced or gendered one. Consider another review by a film critic:

"If *Widows* is pulp, it's pulp made with intelligence and craft and an urgent social conscience...the story also feels attuned to a very contemporary anger, aimed at powerful men and the corrupt systems that sanction their abuses." [28]

Reducing the film to a commentary on #MeToo is boringly presentist, but, in combination with other writings, we can see a skeptical insistence that *Widows* must be *about* race or gender in order to be worthy of note, or at least about some sort of social realism that cuts through the conventions of fantasy, sentimentality, and action. In considering the discourse surrounding *Widows*, it appears that the valuation of non-white and/or non-male imaginaries becomes dependent on their ability to deliver an unexpected plot or to allow us to unearth social commentary that critiques the conventions of genre or histories of representation. Put another way, identity is only legible in the reception of *Widows* as a disruptive, oppositional force. Following Moten, we might instead see the disruptive force, the Black gesture, as something to take seriously as a generative operation, and not just a foil to the normalcy of white storytelling so that race and gender do not once again become mere tools for the displaced labor of proving good taste. Veronica's "reaching out," both concrete and imaginary, becomes a touchstone for connectivity, earnestness, and imagination *in addition to* skepticism and displacement.

In fact, some of the most compelling moments of *Widows* operate (in the tradition of melodrama and *film noir* or even exploitation films) in the excessive realm that would indeed seem in bad taste, to use Moten's words. For instance, two back-to-back scenes in the middle of the film use humor and pathos as yet another instance of the raised fist or reaching out that exceed the confines of legibility exactly because of their overwrought simplicity. Veronica sends Alice and Linda to run some pre-heist errands. Alice has been tasked with buying guns, so she arrives at a gun show with no idea how to actually make a purchase. She poses as an abused Russian wife trying to defend herself from her husband and asks a stereotypically country-bumpkin-esque woman to buy some guns for her. The woman's child earnestly implores that they help:

"Mom, you always say a gun is a girl's best friend!"

It is hard to not break out in some welcome laughter that lightens the otherwise heavy film, and there is a sense of a real, unapologetic desire to give the audience a fun respite from the ongoing discussions of loss and trauma—perhaps the only such scene in the film. However, pathos lies in the fact that Alice was indeed

class difference, race, feminism, and gun violence together. All of these sociopolitical elements are subsumed at first into DeBicki's precise and biting performance, but they begin to reemerge upon subsequent viewings, especially in relation to the murder of Veronica's son by the police and the persistent, racist mythology of the armed Black child.

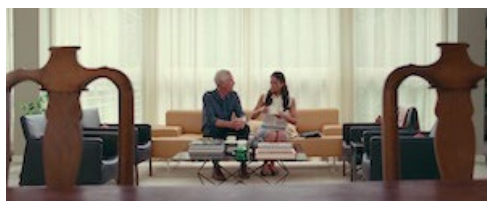
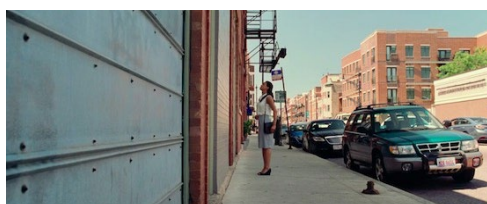
abused by her husband (her motives are therefore different than those of the other widows) and yet needs to perform some other character for a stranger in order to actually ask for help.



Alice's storyline is haunted by the fact of her own abuse, marking her as a widow who is decidedly not interested in honoring or furthering her husband's memory.



Alice's husband pokes her black eye—a bruising gesture that is perhaps the opposite of Veronica's "reaching out."



Moreover, it is impossible to not consider current discussions about guns and non-white bodies, with a startling number of white men using white privilege to acquire guns with little oversight in order to enact violence on black and brown folks. Or one could recall the white female Trump voters who remain silent on gun violence against people of color so that they can maintain their "right to bear arms." These possible sociopolitical commentaries are central to *Widows*, but they resonate additionally alongside the sheer pleasure that the scene engenders in its disarming foray into the comical.

The affective/comical shift in the middle of *Widows* enacted by Alice reaches its climax in a different way when Linda shows up at the house of an architect to get the blueprints of the building the widows plan to rob. The architect's husband answers the door, and Linda poses as an assistant at the architect's firm. She quickly shows her hand, however, when she speaks of the architect in the present tense only to learn that she is actually dead. The husband promptly asks her to leave, to which Linda replies: "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry" and sits back down on the couch. She goes on: "I lost my husband two weeks ago" and the husband alights beside her to offer comfort as she breaks into tears. Quite inexplicably and unexpectedly, they embrace and begin to passionately kiss. Linda exclaims "Oh my god, I'm so sorry" and promptly leaves while the camera lingers on the bereaved widower.

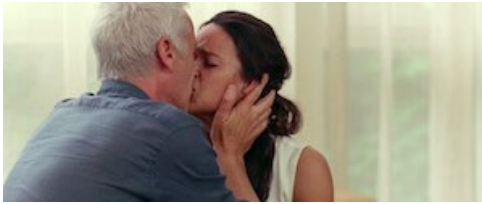
The blithe but doubtless compelling conventionality of this scene, which recalls countless weepy movies with unexpected romantic connections wrought by grief, feels out of place, like a mistake. Yet as a moment of homage and self-referentiality it makes perfect sense, and, even more importantly, it is a moment of sheer, unabashed abandonment of the strictures of cool detachment or irony—an excessive outburst within the chic blankness/whiteness of the architect's home. This moment feels so unexpected exactly because it is so expected, but it nevertheless is entirely affecting in some way, opening up space thereby to allow for irrationality or excessiveness or anti-realism in non-white-male stories.

Interestingly, in McQueen's and Flynn's script, we see Linda's melodramatic *dénouement* both expanded and toned down. A focus on the script could seem unduly invested in the artist's intention (which perhaps we ought to be), but what interests me here is the archival quality of the script, which can either affirm or complicate what we experience affectively in the movie theater. So, Linda's "I lost my husband two weeks ago" becomes in the script:

"I lost my husband a few weeks ago. I have two young kids I have to be strong for. I haven't really let myself miss him yet."[29]

One wonders if the extended monologue would have pushed the scene into the bathetic, or if that was even a worry. While Linda is herself cut short, the dramaturgy is extended:





Linda's interaction with the architect's widower is not only a gendered reversal, but also a rare moment of an uninhibited, unexpected outpouring of emotion that disrupts the film's sobriety. Here, we see a woman of color's emotions made legible, affectively resonant, and understandable instead of being written off as hysterical or manipulative — stereotypes that often haunt women of color. The scene halts the forward action of the narrative in order to linger for a moment on the "disruptive" emotionality of McQueen's non-white-male protagonists. Even so, McQueen foregrounds the white male gesture of the widower placing his hand on Veronica, which suggests yet again a moment of empathy-in-difference rather than and in addition to oppositionality. This interracial eroticism also characterizes the kiss with which the film begins. This opening was seen by some as bold and subversive, while others did not think it was revolutionary enough. Issues of interracial romance in *Widows* deserve a more substantive discussion than I can provide here, but suffice it to say that, as Linda Williams shows, the melodramatic stage was a place wherein fears about miscegenation played out.

"Linda lifts her head out of the clench, to meet Roger's eyes. There is an odd moment of limbo where wallowing in death becomes all about life. They both choose to live. Lips pressed against each other. Nostrils sucking in air. It's a deep passionate kiss." [30]

Of course an undue focus on a script smacks of insider baseball, but what is interesting here are the ways we can track the production of affect in moments that seem excessive or contrary to the onward progression of narrative or good, deconstructive taste. Looking to the melodramatic production of affect is central to McQueen and to Moten, since Moten calls Williams to task for assuming to know the complexity of the Black women involved in exonerating O.J. Simpson. [31] The contexts of Black and Latinx women are different, but what I mean to suggest here is that, following Moten, melodrama becomes an interesting case study because of the presumptions of interiority inherent in it for some subjects, or the withholding of that presumption and allowing certain characters, who are predominantly non-white and/or non-male, to exist as non-agentic reflexes (rather than knowing gestures) set in motion by cliché. The study of melodrama can be productive because of its partial and polemical enunciation of how meaning is made, both as an aesthetic and an activist operation. In McQueen's work, meaning expands and congeals in a way that retains a structure, and rather than jumping immediately to deconstruction, he instead offers a point of identification that could be simultaneously, both, or neither critical and affirmative.

Concluding with Veronica's gesture of acknowledgement, her "reaching out," we might recontextualize it as a kind of *punctum*—one of many theorizations of that point of identification. Race is, after all, fundamental to Roland Barthes's theorization of the term, and so is melodrama. *Camera Lucida* is laden with a mournful (and queer) desire to make the everyday matter, indeed to make his own dead mother matter, in a fashion that has all the wonderful clichés of the weepiest films. Yet Barthes, himself a widower of sorts, insists again and again that despite the emotional legibility of his own writing, photography is outside meaning—and this is exactly his point. The *punctum* is a point in the image that unexpectedly touches the viewer and takes the photograph out of discourse and into the inscrutability of personal attachment. That beyond meaning, that "reaching out," is couched, at least in one section, on the Black body:

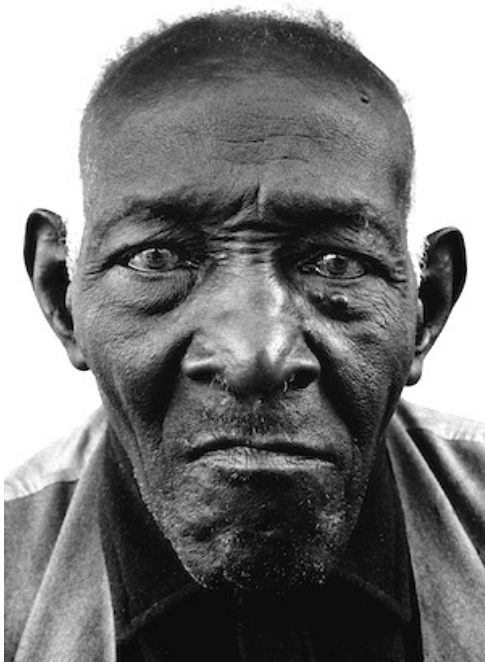
"Since every photograph is contingent (and thereby outside of meaning), Photography cannot signify (aim at a generality) except by assuming a mask...As in the portrait of William Casby, photographed by Avedon: the essence of slavery is here laid bare: the mask is the meaning, insofar as it is absolutely pure (as it was in the ancient theatre)." [32]

A portrait of a formerly enslaved person by Avedon becomes, for Barthes, representative of a coextensive impossibility and profusion of meaning. It encapsulates slavery completely, but also only partially, since it can only capture the mask, the skin (immobilized, unlike the gesture). As a result of what Barthes considers to be the radical contingency of the photograph exemplified by the portrait of a Black man, the photograph becomes an apolitical document:

"Hence the photograph whose meaning (I am not saying its effect, but its meaning) is too impressive is quickly deflected; we consume it aesthetically, not politically." [33]

Following Moten, however, the gesture, the *punctum* of the O.J. Simpson trial and Williams's text, is both aesthetically and politically consumed. Perhaps Moten's ultimate disagreement with Williams is that she, like Barthes, neglects the latter for the former.

It is no mistake that Barthes later describes the *punctum* as a sort of beyond, akin to Veronica's "reaching out," her desire to be both contingent and to signify. He



William Casby, born in slavery, Algiers, Louisiana, March 24, 1963. Photograph by Richard Avedon. Copyright © The Richard Avedon Foundation. Used by permission. Click on photo to see large.

Barthes mobilizes Richard Avedon's portrait of a formerly enslaved man as a metaphor for the photograph's inscrutability, as well as its confining particularity. The Black body as a metaphor, as we have seen in the discourse on melodrama, is a problematic one, and it is therefore essential to see how McQueen both attaches to and disidentifies with this phenomenon.



Robert Mapplethorpe, *Self Portrait*, 1975, © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission. Click on photo to see large.

Barthes fetishizes Mapplethorpe's gesture in this image in order to discuss the difference between erotic photography and pornography. Barthes, it

theorizes the beyond via his discussion of pornography and the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, who had his own problematic relationship to Black bodies:

"The *punctum*, then, is a kind of subtle *beyond*—as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see: not only toward 'the rest' of the nakedness, not only toward the fantasy of a *praxis*, but toward the absolute excellence of a being, body and soul together." [34]

Therefore, a portrait of a formerly enslaved person and a self-portrait by Mapplethorpe differ in their presumed cohesion and depth. For Barthes, the subject of Avedon's portrait becomes a superficial layer, albeit an evocative one, that recalls Oliver Wendell Holmes's racist comparison of photography to "primitive" peoples skinning an animal. In the case of the Black subject, Barthes substitutes the individual for the collective despite or because of the specificity of the photographic document, while Mapplethorpe's self-portrait achieves a level of transcendence. [35] I use the word transcendence (which is a godlike theoretical equivocation that avoid the limits of critique) advisedly here to recall my discussion of McQueen and genre.

One could say that McQueen affords that transcendence to his non-white characters, especially Veronica, but I do not mean to argue that McQueen is apolitical, or that Veronica's "reaching out" has no collective meaning. What is at issue here is the requirement of a certain kind of political engagement or realism in the work of non-white-male creatives as well as the expectation that these creatives cannot engage with problematic products of culture in any way that is affirmative instead of deconstructive or critical. Still more interesting is the perceived impossibility of imagining a film that is "about" Black Lives Matter or "about" feminism in film as much as it is "about" narrative pleasure and a sincere interest in cultural forms that might seem excessive or complicit.

The "She is reaching out" with which *Widows* concludes is an almost too obvious (melodramatic, even) metaphor I am using for potentiality, a chance to consider a non-white and/or non-male engagement with the confines and opportunities of genre, but I will use that metaphor anyway. It is also a chance to consider the limits of critique, which has become even more forcefully a part of how we discuss popular culture, with endless thinkpieces and tweets that combine high theory with mass media. By no means should we demean those arenas of popular critique, but we should, I argue, allow room in a queer fashion for non-white and/or non-male aesthetic processes to be problematic or sentimental or revolutionary, perhaps all at the same time.

After all, it is also entirely true that McQueen simultaneously rejects melodrama

seems, does not afford the same agency to the Black subject of Avedon's portrait.

at certain moments, as outlined by Erica L. Ball in her beautiful and essential essay on *12 Years a Slave*.<sup>[36]</sup> I want to think through a space where a film could be everything at once without falling into nihilist dispersion or regressive universalisms, but I do not yet know what that space looks like, nor should I, as a white academic, necessarily purport to be able to theorize it. *Widows* is an important first step in this project.

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## Notes

1. Dodie Kazanjian, "Reimagining Black Experience in the Radical Drawings of Toyin Ojih Odutola," *Vogue* (July 17, 2018), <<https://www.vogue.com/article/toyin-oih-odutola-interview-vogue-august-2018>>. I would like to thank Felipe L. Núñez, Toyin Ojih Odutola, and Rebecca Peabody for all the generative conversations we have had about race, representation, and affect. Many thanks also to Chuck Kleinhans, Julia Lesage, Linda Badley, Maria San Filippo, Youngmin Choe, and Ronald E. Gregg for helping me feel that I could actually write about film in the first place. [[return to p. 1](#)]
2. Steve McQueen and Gillian Flynn, "Widows," screenplay, 2018, 135.
3. Since Steve McQueen is British, it might be interesting to consider his engagement with a U.S. context. Perhaps perversely, in an effort to illuminate the tradition of non-U.S. auteurs making movies about the United States one could (I do not know that one should) connect *Widows* to Lars von Trier's *Manderlay*, though of course von Trier has never visited the United States at all, or even Nicolas Winding Refn's *Drive*. My frivolous speculation on these connections aside, what should be noted here are the intersections McQueen sees between the Black British and African American contexts in his interview with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.. See Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Steve McQueen, "12 Years a Slave," *Transition* no. 114: 185-196, 189.
4. See Joseph Boone. "Policing and Depolicing the Theory of the Novel" in *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
5. Michele Wallace, "The Politics of Location: Cinema/Theory/Literature/Ethnicity/ Sexuality/Me." *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 36 (1989): 53.
6. Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 283.
7. Fred Moten, *Stolen Life*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 96.
8. Denis Diderot quoted in Moten 107. Other translations of the text in Brooks and elsewhere differ slightly, but I use Moten's version for continuity.
9. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 19.
10. See also Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).
11. Moten 111.
12. Piya Sinha-Roy, "WIDOWS," *Entertainment Weekly*, no. 1524/1525, 17 August 2018. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/2110221979/>. [[return to page 2](#)]

13. Amirah Mercer, "Widows Isn't the Feminist Triumph You Think It Is," *Vice* (December 7, 2018), [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/mby57y/widows-isnt-the-feminist-triumph-you-think-it-is](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/mby57y/widows-isnt-the-feminist-triumph-you-think-it-is).
14. Manthia Diawara, "Noir by Noirs: Towards a New Realism in Black Cinema," *African American Review* 50(4): 899-911.
15. Leah Greenblatt, "Widows is an all-star bonanza that never quite finds its tone," *Entertainment Weekly*, 16 November 2018, < <https://ew.com/movies/2018/11/16/widows-movie-review/>>.
16. Williams 11.
17. Brooks xiii.
18. Brooks 10.
19. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You" in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003, 125-6. Italics in the original.
20. Wanda Coleman, "Guys, Dolls & Bit Players," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), Oct 17, 1993, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times, pp. SM6.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*
23. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 3.
24. Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 3.
25. Berlant 8.
26. Doane 232.
27. Jean Fisher, "On Space and Place in the Recent Work of Steve McQueen," in *Steve McQueen: Works*, (Basel: Laurenz Foundation, 2012), 19. [[return to page 3](#)]
28. A.A. Dowd, "Steve McQueen's thrilling heist movie *Widows* has more on its mind than a big score," *AV Club*, 14 November 2018, < <https://film.avclub.com/steve-mcqueen-s-thrilling-heist-movie-widows-has-more-o-1830445919>>.
29. McQueen and Flynn 81.
30. *Ibid.* 82.
31. Moten 104-5.
32. Roland Barthes and Richard Howard, trans., *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 34.
33. Barthes 36.
34. *Ibid.* 59. For more on Mapplethorpe and race, see Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle* (London: Routledge, 1994).
35. "Men will hunt all curious, beautiful, grand objects, as they hunt the cattle in South America, for their skins, and leave the carcasses as of little worth." Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph," *The Atlantic* (June 1859), < <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1859/06/the->

[stereoscope-and-the-stereograph/303361/>](#)

36. Erica L. Ball, "The Unbearable Liminality of Blackness: Reconsidering Violence in Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave*," *Transition* no. 119: 175-86.

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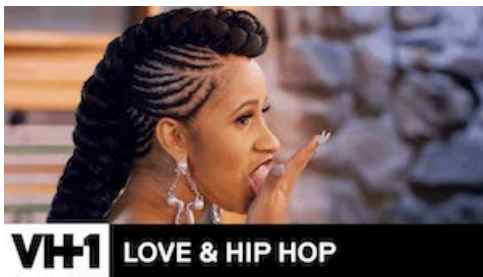


# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Cardi B has notable performances on Instagram and *Love & Hip Hop New York*.



Her Hip Hop career took off after her debut as a reality TV star.



Cardi B notably took to Instagram to explain the classist dimensions of sexism that refuses to acknowledge the success of all women.

## Racquel Gates' *Double Negative* and the film *The Associate*

by [sam a carter](#)

Racquel J. Gates, *Double Negative: The Black Image & Popular Culture*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2018. 248 pg. \$24.95 paperback.

### Day One Bardigang Double negativity mapped onto living bodies

Sweating through my make-up with nerves, I sighed relief at a familiar face in the audience and slid into the chair next to Amari Lewis. She would later teach me that she is one of about fifty Black women enrolled in computer science PhD programs in the United States and Canada combined. At that time, she was just checking on me: "You ready to present? Nervous?" A public speaking coach had given me great advice that I had ignored that day and have since learned never to do again: always bring a change of outfit. Of course, my all white dress had ripped at the hips on my way over, and I was now dropping down next to Amari in an all-black dress with more give.

"Yeah. I'm a little nervous. I got a video of Cardi B Ima play though." That fact brought me comfort and fear at the same time. I was beginning my first year of graduate school, presenting at the 2017 University of California Irvine Summer Research Symposium. Many of my peers were in STEM. But me, I was day one bardigang.

Amari's face lit up just before her eyebrows furrowed her expression downwards. "Wait... is it bad?" She was concerned for Cardi. So was I. My presentation was titled *Bad Things*. I was presenting my research design, developed with the support of Allison Perlman, for my dissertation about underrepresented artists in the broader entertainment industry. In contemplating how to share the premise of my research with an interdisciplinary audience, the first pressing issue to me was to unsettle their conceptions of what art was worthy of our attention and which artists were worthy of our reverence. Thus the title, but I was still concerned for Cardi. For some, she is a kind of negative text, a seemingly bad example. But she has inspired me: a Caribbean rose from New York concrete. We had both come from tough backgrounds to find ourselves on the rise in 2017; her breaking charts, me making literal charts. "Bodak Yellow" may be the only song I listened to that year. I wore heels for the presentation, because I was serious about the task at hand.

"Naw, not like that. It's the one where she talks about feminism, and how people don't want her to be great."

"Yeah, Cardi's dope. You got this."

Something else gave me the confidence to share my thoughts that day. My peer



Kandi Burruss is at the center of one of the most notable scenes on Bravo's *Real Housewives of Atlanta*, but the creative labor of reality TV performers is often obfuscated.



Nene Leakes has been the star of *Real Housewives of Atlanta* for more than a decade and continues to be the center of the show's major storylines.

mentor, Mehra Gharibian, had shared Racquel Gate's 2017 article, "Activating the Negative Image" with me. Talking to Mehra after, I shared that I was glad to become a media scholar in the wake of Gates' work. Her article empowered the research I wanted to pursue and made me feel like there was intellectual value in bringing my whole self to the academy. Bardigang bamboo earrings and all. Reading Gates' work brought the same relief to me as seeing Amari's face in an uncertain audience. Our concern for Cardi was probably also a concern for ourselves.

## Double Negative

In the fall of 2018, Racquel Gates published her book, *Double Negative: The Black Image & Popular Culture*, which explores many questions she raised in "Activating the Negative Image" but in more depth. Her contributions to media studies are essential, her interventions biting. They bear implications across disciplines, certainly in the humanities.

Here I will summarize Gates' main argument and the mode of analysis she defines and uses throughout the book. After a brief summary of her main argument, I take time to explore the interventions made in chapter 4, "Embracing the Ratchet: Reality TV and Strategic negativity" in more depth. I choose this chapter, because I find it illustrative of the critical work Gates does in this book. Her contributions in chapter 4 have resounding implications for future scholarly work on reality television. Then I will revisit scenes from a film Gates discusses in *Double Negative—The Associate*, starring Whoopi Goldberg. The goal of this section is to use the analytical tools Gates' offers to explore what else might be drawn from this critically discarded film. To conclude, I want to turn back to that moment I described in the introduction above, stepping into my own career to emphasize that real bodies are implicated in Racquel's work, too. Bodies like mine.

## Overview

Gates' main argument is that much can be garnered by re-evaluating texts that have come to be understood, for varying reasons, as negative. Each chapter explores a social dynamic through which a text might become seen as negative and offers an alternative reading. In doing so, Gates brings light to the underlying cultural values that mark these binary qualitative categories. She argues that these disreputable texts have their own potency, because "negative representations serve as the repository for all of the feelings that positive images cast aside." (Gates, 21) Negative texts wield a power that reputable texts eschew for social status. Gates argues that focusing on "[stereotypes] or politically regressive [constructs]" at the representational layer prevents critical analysis from moving "past this first level of scrutiny and on to the question of what meanings these texts hold relative to the culture that produces them and their positive complements." (Gates, 19) As evidence to support her argument, Gates returns to previously dismissed films like *Coming to America* and *The Associate* and examples from reality television, discussing the narratives, production details, and critics' reviews. I want to turn to a moment of analysis in the book that I find illustrative of her dynamic intervention in *Double Negative*.

## Embracing the ratchet

Gates highlights queer explorations in reality television in chapter 4 in a section titled, "The Queer and Womanist Nuances of Love & Hip Hop and Basketball Wives." This section contains what I found to be one of the most stunning examples of Gates' mode of analysis, intervention, and contribution. Gates returns to an article by Boyce Watkins condemning reality television called "7 Ways VH1 is Destroying the Black Community." Gates here uses Lee Edelman's concept of futurity to argue that these negative assessments often reveal "an investment not

in social change, but in the idea of the promise of social change as a moderating force for the present.” (Gates, 176) Then, reading Watkin’s critique against the grain, Gates’ extracts from the article the political investments that act as a moderating force in the unfolding present. Her reverse reading demonstrates that these critiques often say much more than they might intend—not about the texts they are directed towards, but rather about the values of the speaker.

Gates summarizes,

“The rhetoric in Watkin’s article emphasizes white, middle-class, heteronormative family structure and appropriate gender roles as the standards by which the shows and the women on them should be judged.” (Gates, 177)

Her reverse reading here reminds me of the work that Bridget R. Cooks does in *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum*, where she revisits reviews of Black exhibits and reads subtexts of racism and prejudice that inform the critique. In this case, Watkin’s critique is representative of a general view of reality television, especially that which centers women of color. Looked at in this way, within these critiques the surveillance of and parameters placed on black femme bodies (and our conduct) becomes apparent. To expand on this point, I want to turn to Gates’ discussion of the term *ratchet*.

What Gates points to in analyzing Watkin’s article is that the boundaries of respectable behavior are not neutral, and they place a particularly exacting toll on bodies that sit, at once, at the intersection of multiple identities and on the social periphery of acceptability. Gates turns to the word *ratchet* to identify the contours of the social center, arguing that the term holds all that respectability cannot.

“In common parlance, ‘ratchet’ connotes behavior that is crude, socially unacceptable, and, more often than not, associated with lower-class black vernacular culture.” (Gates, 144)

I would argue that this applies to other similar terms like “ghetto” or “hood,” words that become catch-all terms for that which a culture discards. Ratchet is also a gendered term, so while it refers to lower-class culture, it is more precisely a word used to describe the stereotypical behaviors of poor black women. Gates describes ratchet in this chapter as a behavioral excess, making the negative connotations behind the word a mechanism for policing the spillage, so to speak. Borrowing from Kristen Warner to build her intervention, Gates’ asks readers to consider ratchet as a space of “performative agency.” Just as respectable, quality texts eschew a degree of creative freedom in exchange for social status, I find her argument to apply to conduct as well. It’s to say, there is a creative, personal, and professional autonomy possible when the excess is embraced. Considering ratchet in this way reveals the performative nature of respectable culture as well. Some of us are acting out, some of us do not know how to act, and yet we are all acting and the choice of how to do so is political. Her argument here transcends media texts, as it describes the parameters Black femmes navigate in this life, whether pursuing a rap career or becoming a scholar.

Gates’ intervention is substantial and calls for a reconsideration of our approaches not just to reality tv, but to a variety of texts. Diverging from the common view of reality television as “[reflecting] or [promoting] sexism, racism, and homophobia,” Gates argues that

“reality television involves deeper considerations of race, gender, class, and sexuality precisely because it is perceived as frivolous, fun, and trashy. It is reality television’s distance from respectability, its location in the gutter of television programming and critical regard, which allows it to delve into topics and issues that its respectable counterparts shy away from.” (Gates, 147)



I would extend this by adding that reality television's location in the gutter also allows it to treat these issues with a productive messiness. It is not always about having the right language and thoughts, it's not about perfection or clear, happy endings. Instead, reality tv's position in the social gutter allows it to concern itself with "[providing] a safe space for emotional and psychological catharsis and the exploration of complicated, messy, or 'negative' feelings." (Gates, 167) Or, more specifically, for "[providing] its women of color viewers with a space to work out the complicated issues of living an intersectional existence." (Gates, 168) Gates' argument poses a challenge to much media scholarship but also notably puts her in contention with renowned black thinkers and entertainers like Angela Davis and Melissa Perry-Harris, whose views Gates discusses in her book and articles. Gates identifies this contention and elaborates further, asserting that black respectability politics carry their own valence, and "do not map as easily along political lines as Edelman's right vs. left comparison." (Gates, 175)

"While those African-Americans who advance respectability politics tend to echo conservative rhetoric, they also do so in an effort to counter the racism that has historically and politically been a tool of the conservative right." (Gates, 175)

Gates brilliantly argues in this chapter that the public perception (and industry projection) of reality tv as unmediated, captured life obfuscates the labor of performers like Nene Leakes or Kandi Burruss, while also placing a large burden of representation on these same artists whose work we do not even often recognize. As an avid *Real Housewives of Atlanta* fan and a performer myself, I have always admired these artists for their skills. Though the general public often delights in being too smart to think reality television is real, the next cognitive leap is usually absent. If it is scripted and produced, comparable to, as Gates claims, genres like the soap opera, then I think that has implications for how we have received and evaluated performers like Nene Leakes. In other words, how do we reclaim the artistic merit in the work Nene Leakes does on a show like *Real Housewives* when the conventions of the genre itself refuses to acknowledge it as performative labor at all? Although Leakes has starred in this popular show for more than ten years, with a performance that spans improvised comedy to dramatic acting, that is all largely overshadowed "as the facets of production strive to render invisible the labor that the women actually put into the show." (Gates, 149)

I conclude with Gates' words to summarize her intervention in chapter 4, before turning to a general overview of the arguments covered in each chapter:

"Whereas some critics of the genre might view these women's distance from traditional modes of acceptable femininity as troublesome or stereotypical, .. these kinds of negative behaviors and representations—understood as ratchetness in the context of this iteration of reality television—enable liberatory possibilities not always enjoyed by their respectable counterparts." (Gates, 151)

*Double Negative's* arguments reverberate with implications inside and outside of media studies.

Gates offers negativity as a tool of analysis to study texts such as these, dividing her chapters according to four main categories of the negative that she defines: formal, relational/comparative, circumstantial, and strategic. Each chapter takes a few media texts as case studies to "provide an explanation for how these texts become negative, the implications of that designation, and an exploration of what texts offer us as far as an understanding of how the media and racial identity intersect." (Gates, 32)

## Four categories of negativity

*Formal negativity:* In the first chapter, Gates discusses formal negativity, when elements of a text's formal qualities render it negative. The author uses details of *Coming to America*'s production along with an analysis of the narrative, to bring attention to the more compelling work the film might be doing. This critical gesture alone contains an intervention. Gates shows that a formally negative text can at times play with artistic conventions in innovative ways that warrant further examination. For example, in the case of *Coming to America*, Gates argues that "the film reverses the standard formula for conventional romantic comedies by emphasizing its comedic B-plots rather than its main romantic story line." (Gates 32)

*Relational/comparative negativity:* The second chapter explores what the author calls relational or comparative negativity, or cases in which a film is received as negative because it comes to be read in relation to other texts released in a similar moment. Chapter 2 focuses on what Gates calls overlooked sellout films of the mid-1990s, like *Strictly Business*, *True Identity*, and *The Associate*, which I return to later in this review.

*Circumstantial negativity:* Chapter 3 examines circumstantial negativity, defined as a media text that has been categorized as negative "due to the issues and debates surrounding it, rather than because of a direct relation to its positive counterpart." (Gates, 33) Here Gates examines Halle Berry's evolving artist persona marked by everything from changes in her hairstyle to the racial composition of the films in which she plays.

*Strategic negativity:* Though I will next turn to focus on a film discussed in chapter 2, in fact, Gates' chapter 4, "Embracing the Ratchet: Reality Television and Strategic Negativity," is admittedly my favorite. Gates makes a few arguments in this chapter that I believe call for media scholarship to apply new frameworks in their approaches to reality television. For example, she discusses the obfuscated labor of reality tv cultural workers and how their negative labeling may in fact be a result of representations that challenge dominant social values.

Next, I want to take up Gates' call to resurrect these neglected texts by revisiting her reading of *The Associate* starring Whoopi Goldberg, to see what else might be gleaned from that film and its negative designation.

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Images from *The Associate*



Laurel's protégé, Frank, telling her she should be grateful after stealing her promotion.



A potential client telling Laurel his business partner, his wife with no business experience, would never go for it.



## *The Associate*

I was struck by Gates' discussion of Whoopi Goldberg in *The Associate*. I had never heard of this Goldberg film. With a famous black female lead, Whoopi Goldberg in drag as a white man, *The Associate* seemed like a film that I should have come across before. Reading Gates' description of the film, I found it hard to believe that it would get such unanimously negative reviews. It sounded unique and smart. I decided to use this review as an opportunity to revisit this discarded text.

In the section that follows, I first turn to the work of Bambi Haggins, which Gates refers to, and Haggins' evaluation of Goldberg's comedic persona. I then return to Gates' discussion of the film, before analyzing a key scene that might reveal more about the film and its reception. In fact, *The Associate* is not a bad film at all. Gates makes the case that its reception suffered, in part, as a result of the same dynamic to which it tries to draw attention. I had to wonder if the film does not do its own sort of reading of its audience in the process of the narrative unfolding. I end by questioning what *The Associate* might do to the categories of analysis that Gates offers.

## Whoopi Goldberg and *The Associate*

As a lead actress, Whoopi Goldberg's artistry and artist persona add their own layer of writing to the film text. Haggins writes,

"Whoopi has acquired what few black female comic entertainers [...] have been able to gain: access to white main stages and the entertainment mainstream." (Haggins, 132)

Starting with a one-woman show, *The Spook Show*, that eventually toured Broadway, Goldberg is one of fewer than 20 artists to win an Emmy, Grammy, Oscar, and a Tony (EGOT). Haggins dedicates a chapter to Goldberg, whom she refers to as the crossover diva, analyzing Goldberg's stage performances and enigmatic presence in the media industry. Haggins' description here is apt, particularly in considering Goldberg playing Laurel Ayres in *The Associate*:

"Goldberg's forthright comedic persona posits her in unique and problematic space within the entertainment industry: a sort of A-list star with an asterisk next to her name. [...] In the film industry [...] her uniqueness is not necessarily a good thing." (Haggins, 145)

One may expect that Laurel Ayres is a character Whoopi can relate to: a black woman at the top of her game in a white-male-dominated field, something of an odd (wo)man out. Goldberg here plays a capable finance associate, Laurel Ayres, who quits her job when the white man she trained steals her promotion. She decides to start her own business and quickly finds that the same clients refuse to do business with just her. Each time she is rejected, they tell her it is because their business partner would never go for it. Ayres soon realizes that these clients are blackballing her, making up business partners to ease the blow of rejection for her and themselves.

Under pressure to find a way to bring legitimacy to her work, Laurel creates a fictitious business partner named Robert S. Cutty. Cutty, in contrast to Laurel, is characterized as a successful, worldly, wealthy white man. The concept of Cutty is





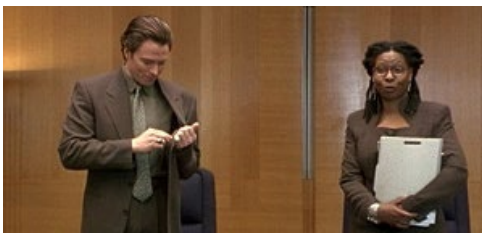
The moment Laurel creates her fictitious character. In a meeting with business executive Mr. Fallon, she sees the word "Cutty" on a liquor bottle.



The interior of Robert S. Cutty's alleged office designed by Laurel.



Sally mocking Frank after he casually calls her "sweetie."

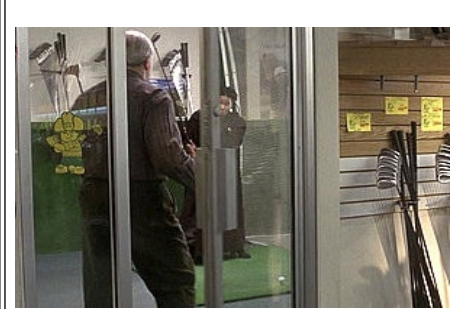


Frank and Laurel presenting their work.

itself a product of Laurel's genius. Ayres undergoes an intense research process to create a believable character, the results of which is most apparent in the interior design of his office and the details of his alleged whereabouts. In so doing, the film sheds light on the performative aspects of upper-class, white, professional culture, of which upward mobility in the United States forces us all to become avid students. Being talented is not enough. There are a series of professional cultural codes and cues to which Laurel remains a stranger but upon which her success depends. A fictitious Cutty was able to open more doors than the real-life capability and labor of Ayres.



Fallon plays golf in Robert S. Cutty's alleged office.



Laurel practicing golf.

The women in *The Associate* resist the microaggressions, disregard, and condescension they face in the workplace with facial expressions, slights of tongue, and subtle looks.

The opening scene exemplifies the film's use of reaction and close-up shots to communicate another story just beneath the surface. Laurel and her white male protégé, Frank Peterson, sit on one side of the table with satisfied white male executives on the other side, praising their work. Frank elides their praise, saying that Laurel and he just do the grunt work. Laurel corrects him jokingly, "I didn't grunt once," rejecting the masculine bodily gesture and the dismissal of the significance of her work. When everyone stands up to conclude the meeting, Laurel makes a science reference that leaves all of the white men stuck with hesitant confusion. The film establishes from the beginning that Laurel works the hardest, and she is the smartest in the room. Her intelligence is evident throughout the film as Laurel Ayres expertly manages to find the loopholes in the codes of the world she is left to navigate.

Next, I want to discuss a powerful scene towards the end of the film. In this scene, Whoopi Goldberg is in drag as Robert Cutty sitting in the back of a car next to the business executive, Fallon, who is trying to broker a deal. This scene comes at the climax of the film when, under professional pressure, Laurel is forced to don drag so that she can produce the "real" Robert S. Cutty, who by this time has become notorious for his brilliant business savvy. Laurel as Cutty finds herself in the backseat of a car with the very business executive for whom she created Cutty. This scene is significant to me because it points to another possible reason why *The Associate* was not well received. There is no romantic thread in the film whatsoever. No allusions to it, nothing in the B-plot. I was struck by this absence and realized then that I had rarely ever (if ever) seen a female character (main or otherwise) without any romantic elements surrounding her. *The Associate* stars a



Laurel stands out as the only black woman and the most capable at her job.



Confused white men in power.



Laurel as Cutty mocking Fallon after he suggests Laurel should find a man if she wants a baby.



Photographs and autographs of celebrities Cutty supposedly knows.

black woman whose passion is her career and excelling at it. And just that.

Perhaps there is something about Whoopi's artist persona that makes this absence almost go unnoticed. Haggins refers to it as a desexualized element, a purposeful androgyny, a certain refreshing ambiguity around Whoopi's sexuality that seems to say the same thing as Laurel's: just focus on the quality of my work. Men can live in almost any familial situation and still stand independent and intact in their professional lives. In contrast, a woman's professional life can be completely overshadowed by her dealings with men. For me, Cardi B serves as a great example here. In all of the controversy surrounding her love life, people taking sides about what she should do in her personal intimate world, what seems to get lost in the public commentary is the fact that she is a young woman, from a poor background, now dominating the music industry (with notable success in television and fashion as well), and challenging class and race-based conceptions of feminism at the same time.

The car scene suggests that the script was self-aware about this romantic absence. When Fallon speaks to Cutty about making a deal together that might push Laurel out of the project, Cutty responds saying that this work is Laurel's baby. To this, Fallon laughs, saying, "If Laurel wants a baby, let her go find a man and have one." A woman's ambition is most legible when it pertains to home and family, but in the workplace, it can be unwelcome if it cannot be appropriated and stolen, as both Frank and Fallon attempt to do. To add insult to injury, when Cutty's face turns cold at Fallon's comments, Fallon asks Cutty if maybe he is sick or under weather, never contemplating that Cutty might be offended on behalf of his black female business partner. The suggestion here is that Fallon assumes there is a strength in white male camaraderie that outweighs whatever working relationship Cutty may have with Laurel.

In *Double Negative*, Racquel Gates revisits a film review of *The Associate* by Stephen Holden of the *New York Times*. He complains that the film puts the biggest moment off till the end. In the same way as she reads the subtext of Boyce Watkin's critique of reality television, Gates notes:

"The consistency of these reviews is telling, for they seem to ignore that the film is about Laurel's struggles as a smart, capable black woman who cannot get her talents recognized in the white patriarchal business world, no matter how hard she tries. By criticizing *The Associate* for not privileging her white, male creation, the reviewers inadvertently underscore how deep the problem truly runs." (Gates, 108)

Other reviews of the film, for example by Robert Ebert, describe Goldberg's attempt to portray a white man as a failed project and thus deem the film a failure accordingly. These critiques are short-sighted for two reasons. The first is that they ignore the way that Ayres was performing Cutty throughout the film. For example, the office that Laurel designs as Cutty's could be said to be a kind-of well-researched spatial drag, from the decor to the autographed photos of stars Ayres determined Cutty might know or have met. By that, I mean that a space can be coded and interior decoration can be said to do its own performance. Secondly, given the theme of the film, I have to wonder if Goldberg's drag was meant to be convincing. In contrast with the white face that Eddie Murphy dons to play a stable white character in *Coming to America* as discussed by Gates, Whoopi transforms reluctantly before our eyes. Is it a failure? Maybe, maybe not. Can something productive be read in that failure? Perhaps everything.

## Conclusion

Racquel Gates' *Double Negative: The Black Image & Popular Culture* makes contributions and interventions critical to and beyond the field of media studies.



Laurel removing her Cutty drag.

What else has been lost to qualitative binaries that dictate what is worthy of discussion? It seems wise to conclude with the caution with which Gates begins the book. Positive and negative designations are not inherent to the texts. Rather, texts move within a social system that marks and categorizes them according to the values that circulate within that system. Gates' work calls on media scholars to turn to these texts as an intellectual resource, where information can be gained about the politics of a text's receiving environment.

Beyond the concrete contributions of Racquel Gates' *Double Negative*, I wanted to begin this review with a personal narrative because I think the most important intervention for me can be seen in this moment. Me sitting next to Amari Lewis, one of few Black women getting an advanced degree in computer science in North America, and me, an aspiring media scholar with a penchant for trap music. The comfort that I felt presenting my ideas and concerns that day, bringing my whole self to the room, feeling confident in what I had to offer as an academic, that is part of the intervention Gates' work makes as well. That is to say, some of our bodies are the negative, discarded texts. Some of us exhibit the wrong ways of being, left to navigate a social environment hostile to who we are or to whom we are invisible. I am happy I get to be a scholar after the work of Racquel Gates, because otherwise I am not sure what type of scholar I would have become. Now I can just be me.

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## 12 Years a Slave and The Birth of a Nation: two moments in representing race

a visual essay by Julia Lesage

In this essay I offer a close analysis of two films, *12 Years a Slave* and *The Birth of a Nation*, made a century apart, about slavery and its aftermath in the United States. In one sense, *12 Years a Slave* is today's counter-narrative to Griffiths' historically important work.[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#). I am hoping here that discussing these two films together lets us re-think cinematic historical representation in relation to the very different aesthetic and political choices that shape each film. Especially important, re-viewing *The Birth of a Nation* alongside *12 Years a Slave* puts into clearer view U.S. racial history, and the history of racial representation, as the films provide insight into hegemonic social structures still troubling us today, such as the dangers that black men and women face in public space.



*12 Years a Slave* is an adaptation of a memoir by Solomon Northup, who was a free man living with his family in Saratoga Springs, NY. The film uses a realist mode of narration.



Solomon was tricked into taking a job in Washington, DC, drugged, sold to slavers, and shipped South into captivity.



Finally, almost miraculously, white friends from the North find out about him and effect a rescue, so that he is returned to his family.

*The Birth of a Nation* depicts the Civil War and Reconstruction through the eyes of two families, one from the North and one from the South. It draws from a virulently racist novel, *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* by Thomas Dixon Jr. Above: an imagined idyllic past with happy

slaves picking cotton in the background, while an incipient romance between a northern young man and a southern young woman advances.



The film opposes the anarchy that it posits comes from giving freed slaves the franchise. In this town, that political move was executed by a U.S. Congressman, a "mulatto" villain, and carpetbaggers, outside agitators from the North. The film uses melodrama and a metaphoric mode of expression to imagine the origin of the Ku Klux Klan as the birth of a nation, that is, the birth of a renewed South which seemingly restores public order after its defeat in the Civil War.



The narrative ties together its imagined social disorder to a melodramatic plotline about "protecting white womanhood." One of the ways it does this is by demonizing interracial relations or "miscegenation." Such an ideology of racial purity was even more grotesquely developed in Dixon's novel. The result in the film script of centering the villainy on one self-deceived, liberal Northern Senator and a grotesque mixed race man was a commercially successful tactic and resulted in a widely seen "high art" film.

In considering the filmmakers' political intention, I have no evidence that *12 Years a Slave*'s director Steve McQueen or script writer John Ridley thought of *The Birth of a Nation* when developing their film, only that McQueen wanted to make a film about slavery since the details of that history are so rarely brought up in contemporary popular culture or acknowledged in popular memory. McQueen said in interviews that he long had the idea to make a film about slavery with the protagonist being a freeman kidnapped and sold into bondage. Such a character, as an "outsider," would learn the rules of survival along with the viewer. McQueen and black screenwriter John Ridley read about U.S. slavery and discussed this project but did not settle on a specific approach until the director's wife, Bianca Stigter, showed them Northup's 1863 autobiography, *12 Years a Slave*, filled with many concrete details about slave labor and the daily life of slaves.[2]

*The Birth of a Nation*, in contrast, was based on a racist sentimental novel, *The Clansman*, by Thomas Dixon, tracing at length the romance between two couples who bridge North and South, a Southern version of Reconstruction, philosophical discussions about whites and blacks as two species, and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. It is highly melodramatic, a kind of anti-*Uncle Tom's Cabin*. [3] To a certain degree, the older and newer films' contrasting literary origins suggest the appropriateness of a very different visual style for each, although the style differences also can equally be attributed to new audience expectations across the large span of years. In this essay, I

analyze *12 Years a Slave* first, since it takes up the antebellum slave era in the United States. In turn *The Birth of a Nation* treats the antebellum South, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. However, my organization is also conceptually motivated. *12 Years a Slave* uses a realist narrative script and visual style, presenting many details of slave life; in contrast, *The Birth of a Nation* has a much more melodramatic script and suppresses references to the mores and economy of the antebellum South in favor of developing a new plotline about Southern white women under sexual threat from black men (the Southern “rape complex”)[4] and white men regaining public space, all of which is not depicted realistically but metaphorically (as the film’s title announces). Deriving from his left-liberal politics and his greater distance years-wise, McQueen’s contemporary film traces the story of what Griffiths’ conservative film, closer to the slave era, cannot face.

## Metonymy and metaphor

Briefly put, *12 Years a Slave* relies on a rhetoric of metonymy to draw meaning from its fictional world, while *The Birth of a Nation* delineates its fictional world in the service of a raced and gendered national metaphor. That is, *12 Years a Slave* draws upon the conventions of “realist” cinematic narrative, as delineated by Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*. [5] The aesthetic tropes of that cinema have achieved a dominance in commercial fictional film and television worldwide, and in *12 Years a Slave*, director McQueen and screenwriter John Ridley largely adhere to its conventions, breaking from them only occasionally for some specific reason related to the theme—one man’s experience under slavery.

In realist fictional cinema, audience expectations about cohesive and “readable” characters and spaces are adhered to, as well as audience expectations that costume, camera work (for example, long shot, close up, tracking, shot duration, continuity editing, and mise-en-scene) will be used in a predictable way to express meaning. In this perspective, “realist” meaning usually comes from metonymy, a rhetorical device in which the part—in cinema, a small visual detail or a camera move, such as a close up—can express the meaning of the whole. In fact, it is the way the narrative accumulates density by building upon and emphasizing one small embedded detail after another that makes it realistic. [6] The aesthetic “moves” of fiction filmmaking are well known by screenwriters, sound designers, costumers, actors, and directors but are often not noticed by audiences at all; the very word “continuity” means invisibility of process is the makers’ goal.



**Metonymy:** In cinematic realism, costume, body language, environment, foreground-background relations, shot composition, detail shots, camera angle and movement—all these contribute to the plot, usually in a redundant or mutually reinforcing way. Here Solomon conveys his status as a respected citizen and free man through his body posture, clothes, and relation to other businessmen.



The scene conveys in an unspoken manner the labor of slave women on a Sunday at the plantation. They do their household tasks, their clothes are worn and drab, the big house is in sight in the background. The plantation “household,” masters and slaves, were always in relatively close contact with each other. The slave women have an unspoken community among themselves.





The entire film, *12 Years a Slave*, uses composition within the frame to connote Solomon's mental and physical state, and on a larger scale the differences between free and slave life. This medium shot which functions as a tableau shows the physical and social condition of Solomon (frame right) after he is taken into slavery and that of his fellow slaves. They are at a slave market in New Orleans waiting to be sold. He is shackled. The two slaves in the center bear scars and also wear muzzle shackles. The slavers stand above them and wear suits. None of the slaves' faces are shown, a comment on the loss of individuality. The bodies and body language also invite viewer reflection on the human figures' social position and personal history.

In contrast, and coming at the inception of Hollywood fiction film and shaping it, *The Birth of a Nation* uses a much more overtly melodramatic structure, a dramatic genre which audiences at the time knew and loved. It pays very little attention to the kinds of structures that later films might delineate: versions of popular knowledge, especially about science, work processes, or psychological states; the war between the sexes (except for raced rape threat), the lives of the working class.

Rather, it takes for granted what Deborah Barker has described as the Southern rape complex, in which black-on-white rape becomes a metaphor for the defeated South, and indeed this film probably was one of the main vehicles for re-generating that complex over many years. Since the film excises the structures of slavery and the antebellum mindset of slaveholding class from its narrative, the film narrative projects onto blacks that class's deepest fears—loss of civic control and white male impotency masked by this new emphasis on sexually aggressive black men.

Metaphor works by *not* representing something directly, here not developing reference to details of antebellum slave economy and daily life, both for masters and slaves. Rather the metaphor works by analogy (the rape of the South) and substitution of a comparator of a different order. Furthermore, not only did the rape metaphor shape a film narrative, it also became what George Lakoff and Mark Johnson would call a “conceptual metaphor,” a common ideological mindset that people in a given culture might use to organize their experience. Here the metaphor is about controlling public life and racial purity, including that of white women.[7]



Elsie Stoneman has been captured by Silas Lynch, who is determined to have her. He wants a white wife and would force her into marriage, the cinematic version of rape. The film's whole plot revolves around the threat to white women.

Elsie is saved by Ben Cameron, who has ridden to her rescue with the KKK. He reveals his identity. This shot merges two of the film's two main themes, the birth of the Klan and the saving of white womanhood.

To say that the recent film, like many other theatrical successes, relies on a realism based in metonymy and that the older film relies on a popular melodramatic structure to develop a politically expedient metaphor is not to isolate these aesthetic strategies as unique to either film. *12 Years a Slave* has many melodramatic moments of heightened emotion; and it, too, can be seen as delivering a “message” or metaphor for people; in fact, historical fictions often deliver messages for contemporary times. *The Birth of a Nation*, in turn, was hailed as milestone of realist historical fiction, especially in its depiction of the Civil War. It uses metonymy to establish what Roland Barthes calls “the reality effect.” In practice, theatrical melodrama was long known for taking up current problems and staging them with realistic sets and costumes; the plot structures however remained very similar—beleaguered innocents, suffering victims, heroes, villains, and evil vs. good.[9]

I turn now to a close analysis of selected moments from these two films to indicate how they tell their stories, reference history, and address an audience—or potentially have different effects on viewers depending on the viewers’ own situations. Since I have a background in both production and criticism, I have a particular interest in how cinematic/script tactics influence meaning and this will be reflected in what I see in the films and thus what I write.



Racial purity metaphors are most clearly developed in the film by depicting “race mixers” as self-deceived, criminal, or out of control, or all of these at once. U.S Representative Austin Stoneman is a thinly veiled version of real-life U.S. Representative Thaddeus Stevens, leader of the Radical wing of the Republican Party and one of the major authors of Reconstruction legislation. He was reputed to have a lifelong love relation with his housekeeper, Lydia Hamilton Smith, here represented by the “mulatto” character, Lydia Brown.



In Washington DC, Stoneman presents his protege, Silas Lynch, to the other Congressmen in a meeting at his home after Lincoln's death. The original novel, *The Clansman*, had long passages about the evils of race mixing, too extreme to be put in a nationally distributed film. Rather, such a philosophy is embodied metaphorically in the characterization.

Lydia Brown listens to Stoneman's elevation of Lynch with glee. She acts deranged in her expressions and movements. Later she collaborates with Silas Lynch to hold Elsie Stoneman captive while Lynch forces the young woman into marriage. Thus, not explicitly stated, but worked out in the narrative and characterization, the film locates “miscegenation” as evil and something that must be contained. Lydia Brown and Silas Lynch are thus *metaphors* for the consequences of race mixing.





## 12 Years a Slave: Solomon Northup as a free man in the North

*12 Years a Slave* introduces protagonist Solomon Northup as a free black man in 1841 living in Saratoga NY. Both he and his wife, Anne, work, he as a musician and his wife as a caterer who travels throughout the Northeast to work at hotels for special events. Solomon takes pride in his family and has a lively social presence in the town. At one point early in the film, in a flashback, we see him walking with his family on a commercial street, tipping his hat and chatting to another black family and then crossing the street, the whole family well dressed and freely enjoying access to urban public space.

The family enters Parker's store, where the children run in first and the younger takes a piece of candy. Anne Northup is shopping for a carryall bag for a trip away from home; she picks out a bag that Solomon thinks is a little expensive. Then a simply dressed black man, whom we had seen earlier following behind a well-dressed white man on the street, enters the store, stands in the doorway, and wonderingly looks around. His unfamiliarity with such a store and its goods seems to mark him as a slave. As Parker excuses himself from Solomon and Anne and goes to greet this man as a potential new customer, the man's master comes in and pardons himself for the intrusion. Solomon looks the master in the eye and responds cordially, "No intrusion," as an equal. The man says, "Good day, sir," addressing himself only to Parker, and deliberately so.

This brief sequence and our earlier view of Solomon's family's large two-story frame house present a somewhat utopian view of what a cook and a fiddler might afford at the time, but in fact it is a common kind of middle class mise-en-scene that film viewers are used to seeing as a protagonist's "home." In this narrative, these domestic fantasies of home preoccupy Solomon after he has been kidnapped and beaten and is held in a basement cell by slavers, about to be shipped South. The memories make clear to the viewer the kind of identity Solomon has relied upon as a freeman in the North and is now losing. Small aspects of the visual track, such as costumes or the acts of shopping, walking around the city, taking a carriage, freely talking with whites establish as a concrete reality Solomon's way of life, which he will lose.







Just a walk in a park, with broad expansive spaces and freedom to move through them remains a memory for Solomon and the viewer in the latter two-thirds of the film.



Solomon and his wife both have careers and partake of the ideology of bourgeois individualism. As that ideology is enacted legally in the North, Solomon and Anne can enter into contract labor as free agents, use their money for clothing and a home, have full legal rights over their family, and live in a thriving urban space with many stores to shop in and places to visit or work. They have the freedom to move through all public space, including traveling out of state.

Following a freeman into slavery means that the narrative will focus on his loss of identity. Thus these origin-flashbacks of “home” are somewhat utopian since they are based on a memory of what Solomon has lost. They set up a contrast between the capitalist North and the agrarian slaveholding South as they indicate differences in economy, law, geography, public and private space, gender relations, and personal and social psychology. In terms of the narrative message, the script was based on research but in this historical fiction, such concepts which the viewer may or may not tease out, are expressed metonymically, through contrastive detail.

Solomon’s native concept of self is that of the bourgeois individual as it developed in the industrial North, along with ideas of entrepreneurship and the self-made, self-reliant man.[10] When Solomon takes a job that requires him to travel, for example, he looks forward to seeing more of the country. In particular, he is proud of his craft as a violinist/fiddler, his family and his role as *pater familias*, his companionate marriage, his house, his family’s personal appearance, and his ability to craft for himself and them “a good life.” Such moral autonomy means that he is free to grow, develop both material and inner resources, act, plan, create values, choose many aspects of his daily routines, and forge short and long term goals. In particular, to think of oneself as an individual means assuming certain things about time: the reliability of cause and effect and the efficacy of planning forward to one’s own advantage. And because this vision of selfhood, a kind of possessive individualism, has become a dominant if often uncommented on ideology under capitalism, filmmakers most commonly invest a protagonist with such traits.

What is unique about *12 Years a Slave*, and I will elaborate on this at length later, is that the way of filming social space says something about the power relations depicted, and thus about gender and race as well as about class. As the film progresses, uncommented upon visual details have much to communicate about how the industrial North and the slave South defined basic values and took for granted different versions of society. In watching the above scene, for example, first-time viewers of *12 Years* may not attend to the slaveowner’s facial expression after Solomon addresses him directly, but they cannot miss how that man hustles his slave out of the store. I draw attention to this kind of play between small gestures and emphatic acts, because such an aesthetic strategy delineates social space throughout the film.



Solomon travels to Washington DC for a job as a musician, while his wife travels to a job of her own out of town as a caterer. Here he is with the con men before his drugging and betrayal. At this moment, he is still able to plan his life as a family man, artist, and businessman.

## Narrative disjunctures

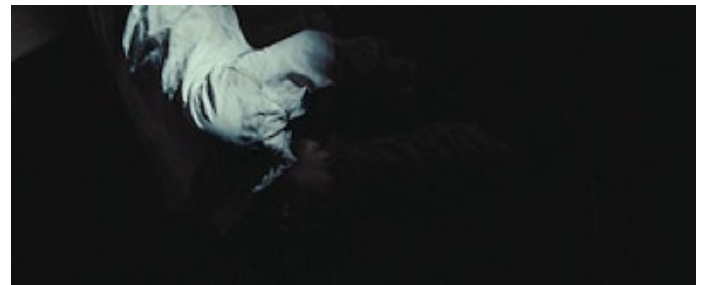
With a structure similar to a captivity narrative, *12 Years'* storyline has a double reversal, the capture and the rescue. In this film there are also two major “punctuation” scenes, each shot as a cinematic tour de force and each summarizing Solomon’s experience as a slave at two different plantations, that of Ford and of Epps. Narratively, each succeeding section of the film has a different style and tone:

- New England, also seen in flashback in section 2.
- Capture in Washington DC, boat passage to New Orleans, the slave market.
- Ford’s plantation, establishing the plantation household’s mise-en-scene and themes. “The hanged man” scene.
- Epp’s plantation, introducing as major characters slave owner Master Epps and slave Patsey. Long, emotionally charged melodrama. Brutal beating of Patsey as film’s climax.
- Denouement and falling action. Rescue and return home.

The film has a disjunctive narrative structure. There is not much dramatic tension carried over from one episode to another. Following its protagonist in almost every scene, the script uses numerous incidents to develop Solomon’s frustration that he has lost his identity and depict his efforts to communicate with loved ones in the North. But his release is not the climax of the film; when it does come, it is a surprise to both him and those around him. Furthermore, when he leaves the Epps plantation, all the characters he has known there drop from the film, abruptly.

In fact, for an author to treat the very theme of the slave experience entails disrupting ordinary narrative causality. Sam Worley, discussing Solomon Northup’s autobiography, makes this point:

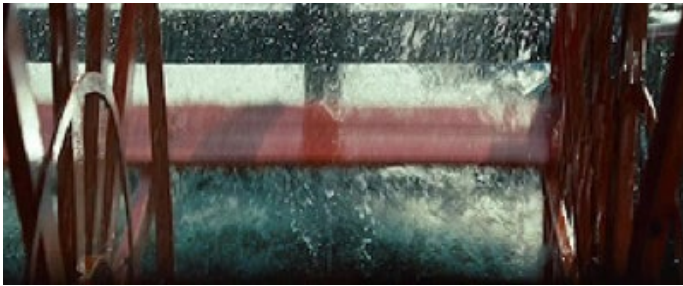
“Any hope of rational narrative form is shattered by his [Solomon’s] kidnapping. His descent into slavery brings with it a vision of the world as a place of contingency, illusion, and disorder, neither inherently rational nor irrational.”[12]





From the moment he is kidnapped, Solomon and the other slaves cannot predict or make plans for anything. They can hardly rely on cause and effect. They know the basic rules of the game—obeying orders, speaking little, and effacing self—and these sometimes work. The slaves expect punishment for their lapses but also unpredictable beatings at the master’s caprice. Solomon learns this hard lesson when he is kidnapped and thrown into captivity.

In Washington DC, after spending an evening drinking with his new employers, Solomon awakens in a darkened room. With the camera shooting down from the ceiling, he lies as a small white-clothed figure in a black space, a fetus emerging into a new life as a slave. Step by step, we see Solomon learn what of his identity has vanished. First is his freedom to move about; he tests his shackles in anger and disbelief. Then, his legal rights, his bourgeois identity, his freedom. The slaver Burch beats it into him, “You’re no free man. And you ain’t from Saratoga. ... You’re a runaway nigger from Georgia.” In the morning Burch exchanges Solomon’s shredded and blood soaked shirt, which Anne had made for him, for the slave’s coarse homespun. Finally, from outside that room, a tilt shot up a brick wall ironically ends on an overview of the nation’s capitol in DC.



Time and his experience of time changes forever for Solomon as he is sold into slavery. The paddle wheel indicates the unknown distance and place he is traveling to as a boat carries him and other captives down the Mississippi to a New Orleans slave market. He experiences a new, enforced identity, and he learns he must hide the fact that he can read and write. Cause and effect are forever beyond slaves' control, and they cannot plan for the future. At the slave market, the slave Eliza loses her children, and Solomon must play the violin in a lively way to cover up her screams.



One of the principle aesthetic strategies McQueen uses in *12 Years a Slave* is just this, to use a noticeable, spectacular cinematic move to carry the narrative forward or to draw some social or emotional conclusion. On the one hand, such a visual style is what makes the film an “art film,” adding dignity to the subject matter and perhaps guaranteeing both the work’s longevity and critical success. On the other hand, it also allows the director to address himself in different ways to different audiences, especially to black and white viewers. Since he uses images without exposition to carry much of the narrative, the viewers will fill in much of the “story” with what they already know about slavery, what they assume about people and social life.[13] Many critics have commented on how the film’s cinematography characteristically sets up tableaux, similar to painting. As a director, McQueen also has a reputation for incorporating nudity and images of privation and brutality in a way that might make the audience feel uncomfortable.[14] But the beauty of the visuals, the use of strikingly composed wide shots, long takes that seem to take even extra time, close ups that convey many emotions all at once, and thoughtful ways of placing the characters in social space—all these are not only metonymically appropriate to the narrative moment but are also ways of giving the viewer (and perhaps the director) a sense of control over, a moment for reflecting on, the terrifying historical moment and personal situations that the narrative represents. The film as a whole invites reflection on what might



be an appropriate way to represent life under slavery, if it can be represented at all.



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# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### The hanged man

A central sequence in the film has almost no dialogue except for its beginning and end, but it says much about the structures determining plantation life. Visually it traces the plantation household and the power relations within and outside it. The scene begins as Solomon is working as a carpenter building a small structure and his white slaver boss tells him repeatedly his work needs to be redone. The slave driver sets about to beat Solomon and Solomon refuses to strip. As the slaver reaches for his whip to strike, Solomon beats him to the ground, and then whips the white man with the coiled whip till exhausted. The overseer of the whole plantation rides up, sends the slave boss off, and tells Solomon, "Do not leave the plantation or I cannot protect you. Stay here." As Simon sits on the unfinished building, shadows lengthen, and time passes till late afternoon. Three men, including the slave boss, ride up and bind Solomon, dragging him close to the big house and hanging him on a tree. The plantation overseer comes out, pistols in hand, calling out,

"Ford holds a mortgage on Platt of four hundred dollars. If you hang him, he loses his debt. Until that is canceled you have no claim to his life."

The overseer chases the three men off. Solomon remains hanged but has been lowered enough so that his toes now reach the mud below him. Close ups of his feet show him struggling to gain purchase with them so as to be able to breathe. As time passes, the overseer, pistols still drawn, paces the veranda of the big house, and a bit later Mrs. Ford comes out briefly to look. The housemaid, Rachel, runs out, gives the hanged Solomon a drink of water and then rushes away. He stays hanged in this position for a long time. Finally Master Ford gallops up on horseback and with a machete cuts Solomon completely down.

Next, in the interior of the big house, Solomon lies on the foyer floor with his head on a fancy white pillow. Ford paces with a rifle, presumably fearing an armed contingent coming to lynch his slave. Simon tells Ford who he really is and Ford replies, "I cannot hear that," that he has sold Solomon to a hard master, Epps, since no other slave owner would take this rebellious slave and his life was in danger at Ford's. In addition, he has a debt for which Solomon is collateral. The slave lies half dead on the big house floor.





This section of the film is temporally prolonged, and for the most part it is without dialogue and accompanied by ambient sound. Sometimes the hanged Simon is seen with the slave cabins and new construction in the background, other times with the big house behind his head. Shadows lengthen between shots. The camera holds on him in long shot, toes struggling to gain purchase in the mud. In the background slaves come out of their cabins to go about their work. Some look at him, others do not. Children play on the grass behind him. A close up of Solomon's muddied face shows his extreme condition.

Finally at dusk, there is a long shot showing the hanged man tiny in the background. Then back to the narrative action as Ford enters on horseback and cuts Solomon down.



McQueen says he wanted this scene to echo many other historical lynchings, but it does much more than that. Metonymically it lays out the structures and daily routines of the Southern plantation household, which unlike a home in the North was a unit of relatively self-sufficient production and in which slaves did both field and domestic labor. Since slaves and masters lived in close proximity, labor relations often closely meshed with personal ones.

As we see the layout of both the Ford and Epps plantations, there is a big house with a veranda around it and various buildings nearby: the slave cabins, a new building under construction, a kitchen garden, a cotton shed, other farm structures, a pigpen (Epps)—all just paces away from each other.



Within this space the male plantation owner, represented by his overseer, had full legal rights over the household. And the slave system needed regular enactments of violence to manage its coerced labor force. Slaves expected random whippings. In addition, there were certain rhythms to slave life, which we see even in the hanged man



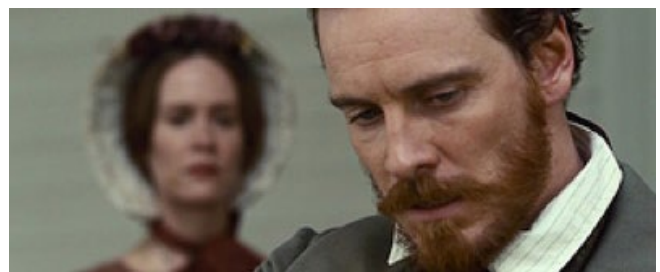
sequence described above—the slaves had a double day’s work, doing the plantation’s maintenance chores and cooking for themselves after a day working under overseers and drivers’ rule. In addition, as depicted in that sequence, slaves also always had to demonstrate that they “knew their place.” Avoiding violence meant reticence, keeping emotion off one’s face, sticking to the very narrow paths and actions allotted to them. Finally, it was not proper for Solomon to declare his identity to Ford, nor later to reveal he knew how to read and write. He was chattel, an expensive commodity ready for trade (he originally cost Ford \$1200). Playing a socially dehumanized protagonist, throughout most of *12 Years a Slave*, Chiwetel Ejiofor faced the difficulty of creating a character who must suppress both emotion and knowledge from his public face.

## The Epps plantation: act 3

Solomon’s time under Master Epps constitutes a long 60-minute section of the film, ending in the climax of Epps (and Solomon) cruelly beating a female slave, Patsey, who suffers under Epps’ obsessive lust. This section of the film is more melodramatic than the rest of the film, with more close ups conveying heightened emotions. The melodrama also gains its force from its actors’ star performances (Michael Fassbender as plantation owner Epps and Lupita Nyong’o as the slave, Patsey).<sup>[15]</sup> [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Socially, the section depicts the power of the plantation owner. The melodrama traces the relation between this man’s absolute power and his personality and capriciousness. Interestingly as a matter of narrative choice, McQueen does not choose to develop in the plot much about the slave community, life in the cabins, slave rebellion or individual escape.



Instead, this section of the film builds audience involvement in more traditional ways, eliciting identification with the beautiful victimized woman and her suffering the attentions of the villainous but arrestingly-portrayed Epps. In addition, as the film portrays Solomon’s interactions with Epps, the film uses the actors’ bodies to indicate the two men’s degrees of power very finely, especially the master’s flamboyant exercise of his least whim and his large gestures, alongside the slave’s reticence and compacted bodily stance. At other moments, Solomon’s story advances as we witness his frustrated attempts to communicate back home. In that sense, this part of the film juggles two temporal registers, the familiar cinematic build toward a climax, and the narration of slave time—the felt experience of having no control over the flow of one’s life.



Michael Fassbender has worked a long time with director McQueen. In this film Fassbender vigorously plays the plantation owner Epps with a focus on the way that man exercises his absolute power, the way it shapes him, and the way it affects the whole household. In the slave South, the master’s law was personal, not impersonal nor adjudicated, as in the North. Ideologically, slave culture assumed a natural hierarchy and order within the household, with slaves legally chattel. In practice, since slaves were expensive and tied up so much of a master’s capital, the slave owner and his wife had to learn to manage rather than just use force on slaves; and this entailed their knowing the slaves as people to a certain degree.

Furthermore, a slaveowner’s exercise of power within the household could easily lead to and be governed by personal sadism since his potential brutality, racism, and sexual use of slave women were taken for granted as part of normal masculinity within his class.



Several sequences portraying Epps and his wife's conflicting relationships with the slave Patsey articulate the particular register of social power enacted intimately within the slave household. In an early sequence depicting slave life at Epps, after some shots of the slaves picking cotton, the slaves stand in the weighing shed where we hear the driver announce Patsey has picked 521 pounds. This is our introduction to Patsey. Epps stands close behind her and puts his hand on her shoulder. The manager continues with his accounting of pounds picked. Epps interrupts,

"I ain't done... Ain't I owed a minute to luxuriate on the work Patsey done? Damned Queen. Born and bred to the field. A nigger among niggers, and God give 'er to me. A lesson in the rewards of righteous livin'. All be observant ta that."

Patsey looks determinedly away.



The human drama of this long section, with the many close ups of Epps (as there had not been of Ford) begins the arc of the "Patsey" story and establishes for the viewer the acting skill in the portrayal of the two characters. In addition, it sets out definitively how the master's private life and desire affects the entire group. In fact, one of the major themes developed in this section is that the master and mistress' private life is not private. In slave culture, it is laid out for all to see. Epps' hand on Patsey's shoulder, his words to the gathered slaves, and her look away are metonyms for his sexual abuse.



Another moment of the film featuring Patsey reveals more about the intimate enactment of power in the slave household. Epps comes into the slave quarters in the middle of the night holding a lantern. He tells them to come to the big house to dance; Solomon should bring his fiddle. The drunken Epps sets the slaves to dancing and then demands they do it with more "merriment." Epps stares at Patsey, who seems momentarily lost in the dance; and Mrs. Epps, seeing the lust in her husband's eyes, throws a heavy decanter at Patsey, hitting the slave square in the face. Patsey falls to the floor. Mrs. Epps demands that her husband sell this slave. When she threatens to leave him, he dismisses her and says he'll keep Patsey rather than her. She has no options and leaves the room. Patsey is dragged out, Epps demands that Solomon continue playing, and the slaves dance.

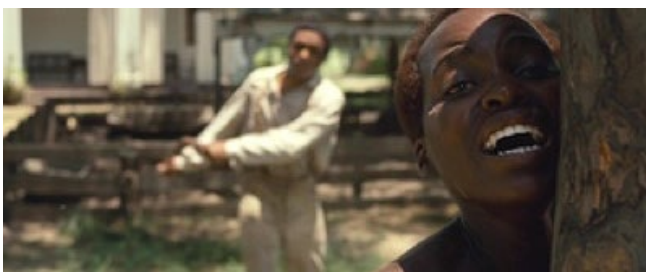


The climax of the film shows Patsey's brutal beating. In an interview with scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr., a consultant on the film, McQueen said that he had to film such a scene in the manner he did to do justice to the subject matter, slavery.[16] The prolonged sequence is choreographed in lengthy tracking shots that move from wide shot to close up and back, showing both the characters' intense emotions and the relations among them. It ends with gashing skin and spattering blood that are difficult to watch. It then cuts to a scene in a slave cabin, showing Patsey's mangled back, the gathered slave community as mute witnesses, and an emotional exchange of looks between Patsey and Solomon.

The setup to the beating begins with shots of slave women hanging homespun shirts on clotheslines; by implication that means it's Sunday, which slaves have off and during which they do chores like their own laundry. A drunken Epps comes down angrily from the big house searching for Patsey. She enters in the background of the shot. He grabs and shakes her, accusing her of going to Shaw's plantation to have sex with "that libertine." She says she went there to get some soap, which Mrs. Epps had denied her, since picking cotton made her "stink so much" it made her gag. As Epps has her tied to a pole for a beating, we hear Mrs. Epps voice off commanding,

"Do it. Strike the life from her."

Epps cannot bring himself to beat Patsey, so he commands Solomon to do it. Then Mrs. Epps says Solomon is "pantomiming" and making a fool of Epps. Epps points a pistol at Solomon threatening to "kill every nigger in my sight" if Solomon does not proceed more vigorously. Solomon whips Patsey fiercely and then can do no more.



When he is exhausted, Epps yells to Solomon: "There is no sin! A man does how he pleases with his property. At the moment, Platt [Solomon's slave name], I am of great pleasure. You be goddamn careful I don't come to wantin' to lightenin' my mood no further." Then Epps and the Mistress head silently back to the big house and Simon comes forward to untie Patsey.





During this sequence, the lengthy tracking shots recompose the scene to delineate the different characters, the slaves in the background as witnesses, the big house, the people's faces, the brutal action. Patsey's naked back is not shown until toward the end. At that point the camera has moved in to show a close up of Epps face, then a swish pan to her back with shreds being torn off at each stroke, then back to Epps swinging now in a circular motion hitting her on every downstroke, the camera moving in closer and closer to his face.

In the next location, the slave cabin, the camera also emphasizes interpersonal emotions and social life, slowly tilting up to emphasize the whole slave community together in the cabin, sad witnesses to this atrocity. Patsey looks up to Solomon and cries; the viewer would remember that she had earlier asked him to drown her to put her out of her misery. In a close up of Solomon, we see his anguish and a tear falling from his eye and rolling down his cheek.[17]



This beating scene is justified both by the plot and the subject matter. It seizes audience attention. It is like a rape scene, in that it shows Epps' sadism proceeding from his obsessive lust, but enacting it to the borderline between life and death. It is also questionable cinematic practice. For a long time media culture has depicted vulnerable women, naked women, violated women in a way that performs, either subtly or overtly, as a spectacle that reproduces the social enforcement of the gender binary, the subordination of female to male. Discussing the social response to a smutty story in a way that would be applicable to viewing the flogging of Patsey and Patsey's flogged back, Sigmund Freud said that even a disgusted listener would feel shame tinged with repressed excitement. That is the function of smut.[18] This sequence in *12 Years a Slave*, like rape and rape threat sequences, reenacts a common location in

representation, one fantasized by both oneself and others.[19] Furthermore, the flaying of the body, or torture scenes more generally, within the context of a realist aesthetic have become part of the iconography of narrative cinema. That means that audiences have a certain learned behavior with which they view such material, expecting a *frisson*, knowing the story will then move on.

Even more problematic is tying this *frisson* to the beating of a black body. Abolitionists used such a tactic of showing slavery's bodily toll by having former slaves display their scars, which predictably would both horrify and thrill white viewers. In this vein, Jasmine Nichole Cobb recognizes the achievements of *12 Years a Slave* but has reservations about the film's very use of a classical realist style. Constant visual surveillance over their captive workforce was a necessity for slave owners, she points out, but the Reconstruction extended such a white looking-practice to a more general, watchful suspicion of people's "blackness," which now underlies racism in the United States:

"...exactness as tethered to the historical record will delimit a comprehensive view of slavery as a system that fixated upon the objectification of blackness. Slavery cultivated the habit of observing blackness, indeed, cultivated whiteness, in part, through the surveillance of blacks. Accuracy as an object in McQueen's *12 Years* demands a willful commitment to the fetishization of black visibility and suffering as essential elements of transatlantic slavery. Demanding that viewers witness slavery's sadistic theatrics, to take part in the subjecting experience, McQueen offers up a screen of subjection to contemplate ideas about humanity." [20]

Cobb astutely describes contemporary racial discrimination's origins partially in slavery's visual regime, surveilling blackness. I will return this point both in regards to *12 Years a Slave* and later *The Birth of a Nation* about the social effects of certain ways of representing race.

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# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Slave women's limited agency

To its credit, *12 Years a Slave* not only develops Patsey as a victimized slave woman, the film also gives viewers a perspective on slave women's agency, however limited. For example, sold into slavery in DC along with Solomon is Eliza, the former mistress of a man who deceived her and her two children when she expected to be given their freedom. In New Orleans, Ford buys her but not her children. Once at Ford's, she will not stop openly weeping for them and thus, as a disturbance, she is sold elsewhere. Although some might hardly call such weeping an expression of agency, for her it is a persistent expression of her identity.

When Solomon irritably tells her at the slave cabins to stop wailing, she says, "It's all I have to keep my loss present." She also presciently warns Solomon not to think of Ford as a "decent" master; if he tells Ford who he really is, Ford will value him no more than "prized livestock." He ignores what she has to say. In another instance where a slave woman interacts personally with Solomon, in the middle of the night at Epps' plantation Patsey goes into Solomon's cabin to wake him and request that he drown her in the bayou since she can only foresee a miserable future with the master and mistress. He refuses, saying such a sin would damn his soul. Yet as events unfold, her request seems more like common sense, and his refusal cowardice.



An even more interesting female figure is the slave Harriet Shaw, mistress of household at the neighboring plantation and a friend of Patsey's, who seems to have gone to Shaw's often to visit Harriet on Sundays. Played with wit and geniality by Alfre Woodard, Harriet has gained power on the plantation through her ambition and sexuality and can live like a genteel lady. "I knowed what it like to be the object of Massa's predilections and peculiarities," she says looking at Patsey, indicating she understands the kinds of sexual practices slaves have to endure.

And finally, one other glimpse into slave sexuality occurs toward the beginning of the film. The film begins with a series of vignettes of Solomon enmeshed in slave life. Here he lies on the floor a darkened cabin sleeping with other slaves. A woman lying next to him looks at him face to face and puts his hand on her breast, then down to her crotch. He touches her without enthusiasm till she comes. She then turns her back to him and cries. He is left in his reveries and we see a shot of him in bed with his wife. The film title comes up.





Each of these incidents is presented without narrative or editorial comment; it is up to the viewer to interpret them. In the first, Eliza acts to her own detriment, and the viewer may agree with Solomon, but it would be hard to deny the accuracy of her perception of him. In the second, Solomon may or may not be justified in telling Patsey he will not drown her, but I can only interpret her look at him after her vicious beating as a wordless rebuttal: “By your refusal to help me, you led me to this.” In the third example, Harriet Shaw is so comfortably placed and well-dressed, and she speaks in such an assured way, a viewer can hardly condemn her for using her sexuality as she does. The placid scene, however, can change at any time since she is still only a slave.

And finally the wordless scene of Solomon’s masturbating a woman to climax alludes to one of the great mysteries of slavery, sexuality and sexual choice among the slaves. The written record only gives evidence of slave reticence on the subject, and the kind of situation here that the film invents fills in an historical gap. Although these filmed moments are open to many viewer interpretations, I assign to these four episodes what I interpret as brief glimpses into slave women’s negotiated agency.

## What we are left with

Solomon persists in trying to communicate with friends and family in New York. He is almost caught by Epps. Finally he is engaged in a carpentry project with a white laborer from Canada who agrees to contact people outside for him. But that carpenter finishes their task of building a gazebo outside the big house and leaves. No results from the Canadian’s supposed efforts happen. Solomon is in despair. Suddenly, and perhaps many days later, a carriage drives up; the local sheriff asks Solomon a few questions to identify him; and then the Saratoga storeowner, Mr. Parker, comes out of the carriage and embraces Solomon. They drive away, leaving the frustrated Epps and a wailing Patsey in the background. The camera shifts in rack focus from background to foreground and all the people on the Epps plantation are left behind, never to be heard of again.

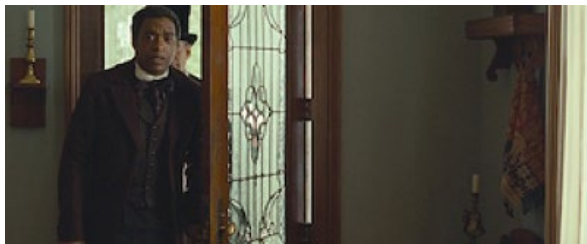




When I first saw the film, this scene made me so angry I wanted to dismiss the whole film as just Solomon's (bourgeois) story. "What about Patsey?" as a viewer I demanded to know. However, this scissor-like cutting off of the slave story is appropriate both to Solomon's autobiography and this film. Both historically and as the film depicts it, there is an abrupt barrier between the ideologies of slavery and bourgeois individualism. From an existential perspective, Simon has lived two different lives in two different worlds. Furthermore the subsequent falling action of the cinematic narrative does not wrap everything up with closure for Solomon or in a happy ending.

As Miriam Petty writes about the film's conclusion, it "refuses a happy ending":

"There is more bitter than sweet when Solomon returns home to his family, whom he barely recognizes. He offers them a halting apology, of all things, for his appearance. ... Even less triumphant is the written epitaph explaining that Northup's kidnappers were never punished, and that the date and place of his death, were never recorded. These devices halt any temptation to imagine Northup in the glorious tradition of American exceptionalism." [21] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]



Intertitles:

Solomon brought the men responsible for abduction to trial.

Unable to testify against whites in the nation's capital, he lost the case against the slave pen owner, James Burch.

After lengthy legal proceedings in New York, his kidnappers Hamilton and Brown also avoided prosecution.

What we are left with, in a spectatorial rethinking of the film, is a story of slavery told in the present. In fact, this story has been relatively forgotten or repressed in the popular imagination. In fact, the experience of U.S. slavery, like that of the Holocaust, may be non-communicable, impossible to express visually or verbally, its losses unredeemable. In a certain way as *12 Years a Slave* narrates the history of slavery, it also abstracts it. That is, because the director and scriptwriter attended to the historical record, the film delineates important benchmarks defining slave culture, drawing viewers' attention to slavery's key structural, social and psychological elements. In addition, the film sets out clear distinctions between capitalist bourgeois culture (the viewers' culture) and ante-bellum slave culture, which gives the viewer a point of identification and a nuanced way to contrast his/her world and that of the slave.

The use of a *fictional* narrative, one characterized in many instances by visual advancement without verbal explanation, allows this version of slavery to present a story about what slavery felt like, allowing for viewers' differing emotional responses and interpretations, especially among white and black viewers. There are layers of meaning at the connotative level of the film, often artfully expressed by the actors in fleeting and mobile facial expressions and in bodily stance, sometime expressed in the script as the slaves' need to dissemble. In fact, we all know very little about what slaves felt, what meanings they assumed, what conclusions they drew in any given situation. Slave autobiographies, like Simon Northup's, give us a partial view, but only that.

Furthermore, although a feature film made in the dominant "classical realist" mode will be highly communicable to many viewers, this aesthetic has limits. As Jasmine Nicole Cobb warns, taking an anti-realist position,

"*12 Years* reveals the confining nature of 'accuracy' (read as: objective, empirical, realistic, verifiable) as a concern for screen representations of slavery. This value functions to duplicate the nineteenth century context for contemplating slavery and limits our ability to imagine new possibilities derived from slavery as a concluded event." [22]

Cobb here presents a challenge to realist discourse as profound as other manifestoes that have greatly affected film criticism and practice. I am thinking here especially about Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," [23] in which a feminist theorizes cinema's gender representation, and Bertolt Brecht's "Notes to the Opera *Mahagonny*," [24] in which a communist theorizes realist drama's de-politicizing effect. Film theory in the 1970s and 80s, especially in the United States and Europe, developed a critique about cinematic realism, namely that feature fiction film's metonymic, cause and effect narrative style constructs a passive spectatorial response. Steve McQueen's films, including *Hunger* and *Shame*, seem to enter this debate in a contrasting way. That is, McQueen narrates in acute metonymic detail his characters' abjection and immerses us in their bodily states. His films often make audiences uncomfortable at the same time that the themes elicit social and political reflection. In that way, perhaps deliberately on the director's part, *12 Years a Slave* can be seen as entering into the long debate about realism and its political consequences.

I will now turn from metonymy in cinematic racial representation to consider metaphor and to look back at a U.S. film that used metaphor in a devastatingly effective way.

## ***The Birth of a Nation: an introduction***

To teach *The Birth of a Nation* after *12 Years a Slave* might be useful pedagogically. I myself never taught *The Birth of a Nation* since I was revolted by how the film had been presented to me as a masterpiece of early U.S. feature fiction film. In addition, as a teacher I found daunting the idea of holding the students' attention, disgusting them with obligatory viewing of a racist film, and taking them step by step through the necessary background information. If I wanted to teach an exemplar of Griffith melodrama I taught *Broken Blossoms* or *Way Down East*. [25] But now it seems to me that if *The Birth of a Nation* were taught after the students saw *12 Years a Slave*, it would become immediately clear to them what the early film elides: depicting slavery, explaining the plantation household, or contrasting freed slaves' and former slaveowners' daily routines.



¶ In the Southland.  
¶ Piedmont, South Carolina,  
the home of the Camerons,  
where life runs in a quaintly  
way that is to be no more.



Historically speaking, during the Reconstruction era, a plantation economy continued to underpin life in the agrarian South, and Southern states' enactment of Black Codes and Jim Crow laws put the freed slaves back into farm labor under old-style authoritarian control. Not defined as such in the film, the "birth of the nation" that the title refers to is the Southern elite's continued reliance on Jim Crow disenfranchisement of freed black men. In particular, the film script builds tension by presenting a version of Reconstruction history that fears out-of-control blacks will take over streets, public spaces, and legal institutions. What is accurate is that both cinematically and historically, the Ku Klux Klan used lynching and the threat of violence to teach freed men their "place," and the film contributed to that.

Also noticeable to today's students would be *The Birth of a Nation's* strange use of sexuality since the plot construction relies so much on rape threats to white women. For anyone who considers slavery's recent legacy at the time the film was made, such a misplaced emphasis indicates that the film's narrative is a projective fantasy, covering over the systemic function of rape within slavery and the role that free access to slave women played in white slaveholding men's definition of their own sexuality.

What may be less obvious is that by having all its main characters live in town, in contrast to residing on a rural plantation, the film is already using an idea of home that has permeated U.S. urban society from the capitalist North. Nineteenth-century bourgeois capitalist ideology postulated the home as a space apart from paid labor, with separate spheres designated for women and men. A cult of true womanhood euphemistically was held out as the ideal for those now decisively relegated to the domestic sphere. This would be a concept familiar to *The Birth of a Nation's* projected audience, one they would have taken for granted. In addition, many members of that audience would have accepted as a narrative trope an idea concomitant with the notion of separate spheres for men and women—the fragility of white girls and women and the danger awaiting them outside the circle of marriage and the family. This assumption naturalizes the film's rape threat narrative, rendering it "unremarkable." For many of *The Birth of a Nation's* early viewers, protecting white women and girls was a plausible way to organize social life and a plausible way to organize a film.



¶ In the slave quarters.  
 ¶ The two-hour interval given for dinner, out of their working day from six till six.



That the Camerons never lived in a plantation household, sustaining most of its needs as a self-sufficient agrarian social unit, would also have been unremarkable, but such a condensation has a usefulness in letting the film elide the former realities of slavery. Presumably they also own a nearby plantation, depicted above. Significantly, we see none of the Cameron women's or former slaves' labor that goes on in the boarding house, nor is there reference to the larger economic underpinnings of the Reconstruction South, still based on a plantation economy, nor what happened to the Cameron plantation nor the land holdings of their peers.

As depicted in the film, Piedmont NC is a small town, with the Camerons living in a two-story house on the main street, facing a narrow front yard and a waist-high white picket fence bordering the sidewalk that's right next to the street. Much of the action in the second half of the film, narrativizing a mythic version of Reconstruction, takes place in front of this house on that sidewalk and street, in scenes that illustrate the progressively distressing social changes impacting the Camerons' lives. The house's conversion into a "boarding house" after the Civil War facilitates the plot development as it allows the powerful but ailing U.S. Representative, Austin Stoneman, to stay there along with his children, Phil Stoneman and his sister, Elsie. (Phil and Elsie arranged this move since he had fallen in love with Margaret Cameron on a vacation there, and Elsie had already begun a relationship with a wounded Southern officer in an hospital in Washington DC—namely, Ben Cameron.)

*The Birth of a Nation's* narrative elides reference to the social, psychological, and economic *structures* previously dominant in the antebellum slaveholding plantation household. Instead the film uses this house in town as a visual

prop in a fantasy drama with clear spatial parameters—the “good” Cameron house faces black disorder in the streets. The script’s narrative excision—not developing its white characters as members of a previous slaveholding class—facilitates audiences’ receiving the film metaphorically, as a fantasy that transforms remembrance. The film’s trajectory connects older emotional structures characteristic of melodrama—e.g, threat to white women—to a climax that metaphorically represents an invigorated masculinity for white southern men, one that depends upon the founding of the Ku Klux Klan. In this way, the film is a white fantasy both about gender and about race.

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# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Struggles in the streets

Three moments from the film will indicate how *Birth of a Nation* develops a subplot of a black threat on Main Street to delineate social relations and “explain,” through visuals why the South needs the Klan.

Stoneman has sent his protégé, the mulatto Silas Lynch, South to organize freed slaves and get out their vote. Lynch makes his headquarters in Piedmont and with Stoneman develops policies to attract the freed slaves, which include encouraging them to stop working the fields and later, after the first elections, to intermarry with whites.



“Ef I doan’ get ‘nuf franchise to fill mah bucket, I doan’ want it nohow.”



At one point, as Ben and young sister Flora Cameron come out of their house to go out on the street, a group of black soldiers come down the sidewalk and push them back. The soldiers’ leader tells Ben to give way; Flora cowers next to

her older brother. Silas Lynch then joins them at the gate to the Cameron house; he is well-dressed in a top coat and hat, better dressed than Ben. Visually threatening, the soldiers and Lynch are all bigger than Ben, and they crowd him back toward the house. From his side of the fence, Lynch remonstrates, "This sidewalk belongs to us as much as it does to you, 'Colonel' Cameron." As Lynch walks away, Ben grips his cane like a sword in suppressed fury.



Later, on election day, all the black men who step up to the ballot box are allowed to vote, while the leading white men of the city are disenfranchised. Armed black soldiers supervise the proceedings. Near the ballot box are placards that we have also seen blacks holding at other times; these signs proclaim: "Equal rights, equal politics, and equal marriage" and "Forty acres and a mule for every colored citizen." Several sequences later, black voters celebrating their electoral victory are depicted in a shot that is visually the reverse of an earlier one of the Confederate soldiers from Piedmont leaving their families and riding off to war. There the soldiers had ridden through the streets, away from the camera, cheered on by crowds of black and white townspeople lining the sides of the street.

Here, in the post-election sequence, black soldiers march down the street toward the camera, with only black citizens cheering from the sides. Lynch is elected Lieutenant Governor. The Cameron women tremble in their household at the disorder in the streets. Throughout the entire film, the intertitles make explicit the theme of disorder vs social order, seen explicitly in racial terms.





And finally, toward the end of the film, the black townspeople, dressed in finery, crowd together on the main street, filling it up, including the sidewalks. General rioting breaks out among them. A white man is pushed to the ground and beaten by a black soldier with a rifle butt. Another man, made to ride on a rail, is pushed up and down by the crowd, as is a white man who was tarred and feathered. In another shot, soldiers in the crowd assault a young black woman. Shots of these incidents are crosscut against images of white families sitting in fear indoors, some looking out their windows to the street below. It is into this melee that the Klan rides, guns blazing as in a Western. The mob, including the soldiers, quickly turns and flees.





¶ The town given over to  
crazed negroes brought in  
by Lynch and Stoneman to  
overawe the whites.





The way of filming social space here delivers a message about Reconstruction power relations, or rather about the fantasy that Griffith and his source, Thomas Dixon, create. One of the chief elements in that fantasy is an assumption that blacks and whites belong to two separate species and that no kind of uplift, through education or evolution, can legitimately join the species together as equals. In his novel, *The Clansman*, Dixon first draws on the authority of Abraham Lincoln to postulate the need for species-hierarchy, and then he elaborates on this argument by means of long social and political discussions between the courting lovers, Ben Cameron and Elsie Stoneman, and also between U.S. Congressman Austin Stoneman and his Piedmont host, Dr. Cameron. In *The Clansman*, Lincoln is shown as advocating exiling freedmen to the tropics, giving them the assistance and education they need to advance to the level of the white race, but Dr. Cameron argues at even greater length that blacks cannot advance to be full and equal citizens because he (pseudo-scientifically) sees them as a degenerate race, “half child, half animal.” Perhaps out of fear of losing a Northern audience, such an attitude is not articulated verbally as a philosophy in *The Birth of a Nation*. Rather the film conveys the same ideas by assigning villainy to blacks and especially to mulattos, with an open fear of “race-mixing.” And it grotesquely choreographs Piedmont’s social geography to threaten chaos when and if blacks overtly assert themselves as equal to whites in public space.

Thus, in the first sequence described above, not only is Ben Cameron pushed off the sidewalk in front of his own house, a black soldier and a mulatto politician remonstrate with him face-to-face and eye-to-eye, standing up to him as an equal. To understand the degree of affrontery to the white Southern gentleman, one only has to recall the mores of the antebellum South, demanding that a slave “shrink” when addressing whites. In this scene, body position, mode of address, and way of looking are all challenges deliberately launched at Ben Cameron.[26]

The ballot-box sequence makes the affront even more obvious since the action and mise-en-scene postulate systemic electoral abuse. Here, prominent armed black soldiers implement the electoral fraud. In addition to the film’s depicting the U.S. Army’s military occupation of the South, the placards posted in this scene, as well as other references in the film to the Freedman’s Bureau and the Union League, address themselves explicitly to the politics of *The Birth of a Nation*’s Southern viewers; the terms point concretely to heavily contested aspects of and political organizing around Reconstruction. If rape threat (discussed in detail later) is postulated by *Birth of a Nation* as one of the biggest threats to whites after Emancipation, then black suffrage surely is the next. This scene naturalizes and authorizes a later incident in the film, one that looks forward to the Jim Crow South.

Toward the end of the film, the Klan line up and face the small houses in the black section of Piedmont. It is another election day and the masked, armed riders intimidate all the black men emerging from their homes, keeping these newly freed men from going downtown to the polls. The visual emphasis placed on street life in the film, especially the scenes of white disenfranchisement and of an armed black population rioting, legitimize the actions of the newly organized Klan. In turn, the Klan not only disarm the black men but restore the hierarchy of commonly accepted behavior in public, including blacks’ deference to the white elite.



These scenes depicting social disorder mark the film as a projective fantasy. The film references little about a slaveholding South, and certainly almost none of the social and political process of Reconstruction. Rather, these scenes in public space trace the outlines of a fearful fantasy:

“What now will the former slaves want to do to us—stand shoulder to shoulder with us and speak to us as equals, drive us from our streets and our civic life, mock us, take over our institutions, marry our daughters?”

Much of this fantasy derives from inversion, fear of former slaves’ vengeance; thus, the above shot of a tarred and feathered white man implies, “They will do to us what we do to them.” What gives this projective fantasy even greater emotional force in the film is the way it is tied to a sexual one, namely that white women must be protected against the threat of black-on-white rape.

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# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Rape threat

Much of the narrative tension in *The Birth of a Nation* derives from the threat of rape which each of its white female protagonists face, especially Flora and Margaret Cameron and Elsie Stoneman. Early in the course of the Civil War, as it is depicted in the film, Northern black troupes ransack the Cameron house while the women of the family seek shelter in a root cellar below the kitchen.



Later, in a major plot development, a black soldier in Piedmont, Gus, stalks and looks for Flora as she goes to get water from a woodland streams. Gus proposes marriage and, frightened, she runs through the woods, chased by him, and jumps off a cliff.







The sexual threat to Elsie Stoneman is depicted in a more detailed and prolonged way and plays a major role in building the narrative tension leading to the climax. At this point in the film, Griffith uses cross-cutting to tie together numerous narrative strands that will ultimately intersect, concluding with the Klan's rescue of Margaret and Elsie and its restoring the family's personal safety and the town's social order. The Cameron family and Phil Stoneman had fled to a cabin in a country meadow, with Dr. Cameron escaping imprisonment. In town, Elsie goes to Silas Lynch to ask for help. He proposes to her and then, with her entrapped, he tells his henchmen to quickly prepare for a forced marriage. Elsie tries ineffectively to escape, faints, is placed in a chair, awakens and breaks a window, screams outside for help, and then is tied back to the chair and gagged. At the same time, the Klan gathers in large numbers to ride to Piedmont to wrest control from the armed black soldiers. Spies from town tell them of Elsie's predicament, so they ride to her rescue, too.







And finally, in the farm cabin in a meadow where the Camerons have taken refuge with some Union veterans, they and some faithful servants fend off a massive attack by black soldiers. As the soldiers try to come in through the windows and beat down the cabin door, the families retreat to the back room. That room's doors are battered and a soldier grabs Margaret. Dr. Cameron pulls her away as Phil Stoneman barricades the door with his body. In an extraordinary shot of that inner room, we are shown Dr. Cameron holding a pistol above the fainted Margaret's head and the Union veteran holding his rifle butt ready to smash in his little girl and wife's heads. It's made explicit that the men will fight to the death but will first kill the women and girl to save them from rape. This scene is presented as a *tableau vivante*, a frozen moment of suspense crowded with detail. Such a rape threat moment in film functions in this way:

"There is .. a disruption of temporality and the time sense. Directorially, the scene isolates the rhythmic pulsations of the threat's narrative moment... The formal treatment breaks up the sensual moment into its parts. The whole sequence functions like the fort/da where the future is made present in the anticipation of punishment and loss. Repetition and a kind of slowing down freeze, for a moment, the syntagmatic rush of the narrative." [27] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

Here, the location of the cabin is so free of other social context that the attack on it seems to occur less as a planned military action and more like an isolated pattern of men with rifles circling a cabin. Then the cabin is filmed from inside in a crowded, claustrophobic mise-en-scene as it is being pierced by rifles, bodies, hands, and arms. In other words, just as the rape motif functions metaphorically in the film as a whole, here the very stripped-down filmic geography turns the cabin metaphorically into something else as well—visually and narratively it's like a besieged vagina, with father and lover ready to kill their beloved rather than let her be raped.





Returning to the larger metaphoric connotations of the rape threat moment, we can fruitfully ask why it functions so predominantly as the emotional force for the film. It has a larger cultural function beyond its importance to this one script. As Deborah Barker describes it, such a scenario of black men raping white women exemplifies a “Southern rape complex.” She describes the myth in this way:

“The Southern rape complex has been one of the most devastating and far-reaching ‘stories’ to come out of the South. In the ‘southern rape complex,’ which assumes a black male rapist and white female victim, the victim is transformed into a symbol of a threatened white Southern culture while the black male symbolizes the threat. Rape, in the cinematic Southern context, carries with it a dramatic resonance associated with Southern history and issues of war, Reconstruction, and racial conflict, and has taken on almost mythic proportions in its justification of violence against black men. Not only is the logic of the southern rape complex integrally linked to the lynching of innocent black men, its distorting lens has also made white female sexuality socially unacceptable and rendered sexual violence against black women socially invisible.”[28]

I would add another level to Barker’s description. On a deeper psychic level, the metaphor allows viewers not to acknowledge, to displace, a key cultural and psychological adjustment imposed on whites, especially the former slaveholding class, after Emancipation—that is, the need to redefine both white male sexuality and [white] womanhood. In the antebellum South, both culturally and individually, white male sexuality included sanctioned, continual, sometimes violent access to slave women’s and girls’ bodies, since slaves were legally chattel and not persons with bodily integrity or rights. A slaveholder had both a libidinous and economic investment in raping female slaves since any children born of rape among his slaves would become his chattel as well. Indeed, the slaveholder sometimes regarded inseminating slave women as a form of animal husbandry.[29]

In its inversion of slaveholding sexuality, then, it is no wonder that the Southern rape complex places such an emphasis on the evils of miscegenation.[30] In *The Birth of a Nation*, all sexual aggressors are black men, so that the script represses recent history and also any internal struggle white viewers may have with re-habituating themselves to very new structures of desire.

At the same time, the film also re-articulates a reduced concept of desirable womanhood distant from the multifaceted role of the white mistress of a plantation household. Posited in the characterizations of Elsie, Margaret and Flora is a more Victorian kind of womanhood, one suitable to the (originally Northern) notion of separate spheres, that of the white, virginal, ethereal girl-woman, the angel of the hearth. Public space and the world of men are dangerous to this kind of woman. Like the freed slave in *The Birth of a Nation*, she has to be taught her place, dependent on the white man who will protect and rescue her. Her future is to bear his children and devote herself to them, and to create for him a well-run and loving refuge for him to escape to when he comes home from work. Buttressing such a vision of (bourgeois white) women’s “place” is the metaphoric function of rape threat for the white women in the film. In addition, such a rape threat fantasy inverts and displaces so much of the psychic residue from slavery, it makes abuse of black women just disappear.

Finally, it is important to note how the film develops the story of Ben Cameron’s recuperation of some of his lost masculinity following the South’s loss of the war. In another moment similar to the one where he and Flora are jostled off the sidewalk by black troops, he encounters the future rapist Gus staring at the Cameron house. He emphatically orders Gus to keep away from there, and once again, Lynch remonstrates about blacks’ rights in public



space, at which Ben turns and walks angrily back toward his house.



Ben Cameron had been organizing white men in the community, but now he has the inspiration to form the groups of costumed, masked riders that would be the Klan. His family knew about the beginnings of this and were keeping it secret, but Lynch and Stoneman found out. To avenge Flora's death, the Klan now lynches Gus. Later scenes establish the Klan as men of action mostly by depicting them on horseback, moving together as a mass group at great speed, and using pistols to effect rescue and justice. They save Elsie from Lynch's captivity.







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# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

After the Klan captures Silas Lynch, who was trying to abduct Elsie, they might lynch him too. However, the film's seeming re-establishing of virility for Ben and his white peers comes at a cost; it requires masquerade and the regular performance of violence and intimidation to keep black men in their place. And it requires a view of white womanhood as sexually pure.

Thus the whole film traces through its fantasy substructure the fragile masculinity of the former slave owners, in a storyline that masks these men's desperate grasp at personal and social potency. The Southern rape myth, re-establishing a frail white virility, itself has had a viciously powerful legacy. Robyn Wiegman summarizes its historical efficacy in the way that it underpins lynching:

"Through the lynching scenario, 'blackness' is cast as a subversive (and most often sexual) threat, an incontrovertible chaos whose challenge to the economic and social coherency can be psychologically, if not wholly politically, averted by corporeal abjection and death. That lynching becomes during Reconstruction and its aftermath an increasingly routine response to black attempts at education, personal and communal government, suffrage, and other indicators of cultural inclusion and equality attests to its powerful disciplinary function." [31] (p. 455)

[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

### Conclusion: thinking about history through these two films

In historical fictions, certain moments in the past are designated by the author as significant and then narrated and re-told with a contemporary audience/readership in mind. In historical fiction *film*, the script, locations, acting, anecdotes, and soundscapes "speak" to the current era's audience and filmmaker's historical milieu. Media culture in general attaches reduced, stereotyped, meanings to race, gender, and social space, but some films have particular value as they try to delineate these contentious aspects of society through historical representation. In particular, historical fictions can illustrate for viewers precedents for current social problems and attitudes or usefully demarcate past social and economic structures that have left a formative trace in the present.

In that context, films about slavery and its aftermath have a special usefulness in the United States today, since the media and politicians generally avoid institutional analysis and historical reference when faced with outrageous incidents of interpersonal racial violence. Institutionally-based, racially-inflected injustice within the United States includes poor people's disenfranchisement, their lack of educational and employment opportunity, legal hostility to immigrants, inordinate imprisonment of people of color, and the legal murder of peaceful black men on the street. For those who want to take action around these issues, the two films I have analyzed here can help us better understand the history and economic/social/legal structures underlying our political moment, inform what actions we might take, and trace what has shaped the resistance that we will likely encounter when trying to make social change.

For example, *12 Years a Slave* speaks to certain aspects of African American lives

in our own times. The protagonist, an entrepreneurial individualist, enjoys the life of a free man with his family in the North, yet he is kidnapped and loses his identity when forced into the life of a slave. Impermanence and uncertainty have been introduced forever into his life. Back in the North, he cannot legally testify against his enslavers, finding he has no safety under the law. As Valerie Smith puts it, the film represents the “fragility of black freedom.” Smith sums up the film’s historical address to U.S. viewers today:

“Northup’s twitching foot calls to mind as well Trayvon Martin, Renisha McBride, Jonathan Ferrell, and the hosts of other African Americans, largely invisible in the media, gunned down each year and whose shooters (whether law enforcement officers or civilians) go unpunished. How fragile indeed is black life in the Age of Obama.”[31b]

In contrast, because of its historical address and overt racism, *The Birth of a Nation* may seem to have fewer messages for activists today. But, in fact, it does teach an important structure underlying racist laws: the goal of white elites to control public space and the use of disenfranchisement in that process. It also shows how violence functions as a disciplinary admonition for both people of color and white women, especially in terms of “knowing their place.” In addition, if viewers are taught to look for this, *The Birth of a Nation* provides much information about “marking”—how characterization, body type, costume, and physical range of action connote much of the film’s message about race—and thus delineates a precedent for what Cobb refers to as the discriminatory marking of blackness today.

Film critics and often media scholars also often point out what a film does *not* show. Sometimes they do so in service of ideological analysis, other times to indicate how audience expectations and taste have variously shaped media production from one era to another. Also, media teachers, especially in writing assignments, often encourage students to further analyze one aspect of a film and to do so via social history, personal narrative, audience interviews, fan discourse, politically oriented analysis, etc. As a result, the students also bring to the fore what the film does not show, and they fruitfully trace the implications of missing content.

If I were to prioritize one thing *missing* from *12 Years a Slave* and *The Birth of a Nation* that has great implications for viewers today, I would teach alongside these films material about the rise of the prison industrial complex in Reconstruction and how the privatized incarceration industry continues in modern form slave practices today.

The historical tie between the U.S. prison system and slavery has been traced by Angela Davis, who throughout her intellectual career has written about and worked as an activist against the prison industrial complex, which she sees as a continuation of slavery by other means. In our own times, prisons inordinately warehouse people of color and the prison population has grown to well over two million in the United States. From this perspective, *12 Years a Slave*’s story of Solomon Northup’s loss of identity, impounded slave labor, and immersion in a culture of violence where every aspect of his daily life is controlled is also the story of contemporary imprisonment. Furthermore, Davis’s analysis of the origins of modern U.S. penal institutions in the Reconstruction South directly augments a reading of *The Birth of a Nation*, since her analysis lends new meaning into to film’s depiction of out-of-control freedmen taking control of the town’s streets and their violent containment by the Klan. Davis summarizes this history as follows:

“In the immediate aftermath of slavery, the southern states hastened to develop a criminal justice system that could legally restrict the possibilities of freedom for newly released slaves. Black people became



the prime targets of a developing convict lease system....Thus, vagrancy was coded as a black crime, one punishable by incarceration and forced labor, sometimes on the very plantations that previously had thrived on slave labor.”[32]

Whipping was common punishment on chain gangs, and these “leased” convicts could be worked to death. This was unlike the plantation owner’s slave management where, because of his capital investment, he needed to keep his labor force healthy enough to work. Furthermore black convicts built the infrastructure for rising Southern industrialization, often laboring on railroad gangs or in mines. In this way, Davis’s writing ties together both films discussed here, tracing the economic and legal bases for controlling freedmen, which *The Birth of a Nation* elides, and the dehumanizing slave-like conditions in prisons today, implying a contemporary extension of Solomon’s experience in *12 Years a Slave*.

Because of the hegemony of bourgeois liberalism, it is often difficult for audience to think systematically about our country’s institutions and economic/political structures, and the ordinary script pattern of feature films, focusing on an individual in conflict or facing adversity, also discourages such thought. These two films, however, have much to teach about what is usually hidden from view.

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### Notes

1. Published originally in "The Birth of a Nation: The Cinematic Past in the Present," ed. Michael T. Martin (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2019). This essay developed out of a paper at the conference, "From Cinematic Past to Fast Forward Present: D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*—A Centennial Symposium," Nov. 12-13, 2015, Indiana University. I was on a panel, *Birth of a Nation: Cinematic Iterations in the Present*.

I want to acknowledg the wonderful work of Michael Martin is putting on this conference and publishing this work. A crucial film in media history and black activism is very hard to show because of its racism. The conference on the film inspired me to think of ways to make it more approachable.

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2. Solomon Northup, *12 Years a Slave*, as told to and edited by David Wilson, Auburn NY: Derby and Miller, 1853.

3. *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001.

4. I will describe the Southern rape complex in more detail later when analyzing *The Birth of a Nation*. See Deborah E. Barker, *Reconstructing Violence: The Southern Rape Complex in Film and Literature*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005. Also dealing with the topic of the Southern rape complex extensively is Diane Sommerville's *Rape and Race in the Nineteenth Century South* (Durham: UNC Press, 2004), especially useful is Sommerville's appendix: "Rape, Race, and Rhetoric: The Rape Myth in Historical Perspective," pp. 223-261.

5. David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristen Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, London: Routledge, 1985.

6. See my essay, "S/Z and Rules of the Game," for a more detailed analysis of this process, drawing upon the work of Roland Barthes. *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 55 (2013).

<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc55.2013/LesageRulesOfGame/index.htm>. Original publication, nos. 12-13 (winter 1976-77) pp. 45-51.

7. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. The film's plotline also illustrates Mary Douglas' argument in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1896) that societies that want to control social hierarchies and boundaries often do so through metaphors of sexual threat.

8. Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986. 141-148.

9. John L. Fell, *Film and the Narrative Tradition*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

10. I am indebted to my argument in this essay about historical difference between regional concepts of the self in the United States to the writings of Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, in particular Fox-Genovese's *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).
11. Captivity narratives were a common genre in the 18th and 19th centuries, written usually by white colonists captured by indigenous natives. Typically the captive would write about his/her captors as crude and alien.
12. Sam Worley, "Solomon Northup and the Sly Philosophy of the Slave Pen," *Callaloo*, vol. 20, no. 91 (1997) 243-259. Here, p. 246.
13. Terri Francis writes of the complexities of spectatorship for Black independent cinema. See Terri Simone Francis, "Flickers of the Spirit: 'Black Independent Film,' Reflexive Reception, and a Blues Cinema Sublime," *Black Camera*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Summer 2010), pp. 7-24.
14. McQueen's previous films *Hunger* (2008) and *Shame* (2011) have many moments which provoke audience anxiety and discomfort.
15. The Internet Movie Data Base indicates that the film won 233 critical awards and 305 nominations. In 2013, it won Oscars for best motion picture, best adapted screenplay, best supporting actress—Lupita Nyong'o, best actor, and best supporting actor—Michael Fassbender. In addition, it won best costume design—Patricia Norris. [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2024544/awards?ref\\_=tt\\_awd](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2024544/awards?ref_=tt_awd) [return to page 2]
16. Henry Louis Gates Jr. "Steve McQueen and Henrey Louis Gates Jr. Talk 12 Years a Slave," three-part interview, Dec. 24, 25, 26, 2013. [http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2013/12/\\_12\\_years\\_a\\_slave\\_henry\\_louis\\_gates\\_jr\\_interviews\\_director\\_steve\\_mcqueen.1.html](http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2013/12/_12_years_a_slave_henry_louis_gates_jr_interviews_director_steve_mcqueen.1.html)
17. McQueen talks about Ejiofor's spontaneous crying in this scene to Dan P. Lee, "Where It Hurts: Steve McQueen on Why *12 Years a Slave* Isn't Just About Slavery," *Vulture*, Dec. 8, 2013. Visited Feb. 17, 2016. <http://www.vulture.com/2013/12/steve-mcqueen-talks-12-years-a-slave.html>
18. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1960 (1916), p. 163.
19. Julia Lesage, "The Rape Threat Scene in Narrative Cinema," paper given at the Society for Cinema Studies Conference, New Orleans, 1993. <http://pages.uoregon.edu/jlesage/Juliafolder/RAPETHREAT.HTML>  
Lesage, "Torture documentaries," *Jump Cut*, no. 51 (2009), <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc51.2009/TortureDocumentaries/>
20. Jasmine Nichole Cobb, "Directed by Himself: Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave*," *American Literary History*, vol. 26, no. 2, p. 343.
21. Miriam Petty, "Refusing the Happy Ending: *12 Years a Slave*," *The Huffington Post*, Oct. 21, 2015. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/miriam-petty/refusing-the-12-years-a-slave\\_b\\_4869602.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/miriam-petty/refusing-the-12-years-a-slave_b_4869602.html) (last consulted Feb. 14, 2016)  
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22. Jasmine Nichole Cobb, "Directed by Himself: Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave*," *American Literary History*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2014. p. 341.
23. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6-18.
24. Bertolt Brecht, "Notes to the Opera *Mahagonny* (1930)," trans. John Willett as "The Modern Theater is the Epic Theater" in *Brecht on Theater*, ed. Willett



(New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 33-42.

25. Julia Lesage, "Broken Blossoms: Artful Racism, Artful Rape," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 21 (1986); updated in 2014  
<http://www.ejumpcut.org/currentissue/lesageBknBlossoms/>  
[NOTE URL WILL CHANGE]

26. In the Jim Crow South a black man acting as a white man's equal would be punished. Martin Luther King developed a strategy of passive resistance partially in acknowledgement of this pattern.

27. Julia Lesage, "The Rape Threat Scene in Narrative Cinema," paper given at the Society for Cinema Studies Conference, New Orleans, 1993.  
<http://pages.uoregon.edu/jlesage/Juliafolder/RAPETHREAT.HTML>  
[return to page 5]

28. Deborah E. Barker, "Moonshine and Magnolias: *The Story of Temple Drake* and *The Birth of a Nation*," *Faulkner Journal*, vol. 22, nos. 1-2 (Fall 2006/Spring 2007), p. 142.

29. In a panel discussion on C-Span 2 about Katherine Franke's book *Wedlocked*, legal scholar Patricia J. Williams said this kind of rape was the story of her slave ancestors, who were bred to be fair-skinned house slaves. <http://www.c-span.org/video/?400857-1/book-discussion-wedlocked>

30. In response to systemic abuses of rape and fragmenting of families, after Emancipation one of the legal rights most frequently claimed by freed slaves was marriage, a public assertion of both marital and parental rights. Katherine Franke in *Wedlocked: The Perils of Marriage Equality* (New York: NYU Press, 2015) has studied marriages in the postbellum South as a parallel to gay marriages today. She finds that in addition to its many legal advantages, the state marriage contract imposes strict gender constrictions on marginalized communities that formerly have had many innovative, unlegislated ways to arrange sexual and familial households and affective bonds.

31. Robyn Wiegman, "The Anatomy of Lynching," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* vol. 3, no. 3, Special Issue: African American Culture and Sexuality (Jan., 1993), pp. 445-467. [return to page 6]

31b. Valerie Smith, "Black Life in the Balance: *12 Years a Slave*," *American Literary History*, vol. 26, no. 3 (2004), 365.

32. Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003, p. 29.

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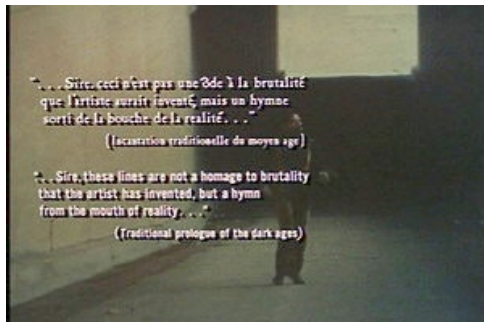
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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Opening title of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, in French and in English, a translation of a traditional French incantation from the Middle Ages. VanPeebles' version:

**"...Sire, these lines are not a homage to brutality that the artist has invented, but a hymn from the mouth of reality..."**

**— Traditional prologue of the dark ages.**



The dedication that follows the opening title of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*: **This film is dedicated to all the Brothers and Sisters who have had enough of the Man.**



## Entertainment-wise, a motherfucker: critical race politics and the transnational movement of Melvin van Peebles

by [Matthew Holtmeier](#)

This article argues that that transnational movement of Melvin van Peebles is crucial in ending the dearth in African American feature film production in the United States after Oscar Micheaux's *The Betrayal* (1948). By establishing himself as a global auteur, van Peebles uniquely navigates the film industry with his first three films and develops a critical race politics that questions the role of American exceptionalism in Hollywood. *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) is a focal point for considering van Peebles' political aesthetics, but I argue that in addition this third feature-length film is the culmination of a larger project that focuses on the director's playing industry aesthetics and practices in a minor key. In doing so, van Peebles responds to the civil rights movement in a manner now eschewed in contemporary remembering, which privileges American exceptionalism. Within this framework, I read his films as a direct challenge to this historical dismantling of radical political projects concerning disenfranchised populations in the United States, projects that include an indictment of U.S. empire. Such a case study is particularly important today with recent films from *Hidden Figures* (2016) to *Moonlight* (2016) returning to a similar divergence in the politics of films depicting U.S. race relations.

Writing about his inspiration for *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), Melvin van Peebles explains that the film had to be "entertainment-wise, a motherfucker" to satisfy market conditions and deliver a political message about race in the United States.[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Though his goal in making *Sweet Sweetback's* was explicitly political, van Peebles understood that in order to navigate the audience/industry desires that drive cinema-going and exhibition, such a politics would have to take hybrid form. He reasons,

"The film simply couldn't be a didactic discourse... The Man has an Achilles pocket and he might go along with you if at least there is some bread in it for him. But he ain't about to go carrying no messages for you, especially a relevant one, for free."[2]

While van Peebles is perhaps best remembered for the audacity of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, he develops his strategies for navigating industry and exhibition currents in his earlier two films, *Story of a Three-Day Pass* (1968) and *Watermelon Man* (1970). In these, he strategically deals with both the French film industry and Hollywood, catering to the industrial demands of each project in order to inject them with a critical race politics that make them speak anew.

In other words, "entertainment-wise, a motherfucker" underpins a political

*The Story of a Three Day Pass*, van Peebles's first film in the style of the Nouvelle Vague.



*Watermelon Man*, van Peebles's second film, a studio film.



*Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, made independently.



philosophy that runs throughout his work. When he argues that *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* needs to be “entertainment-wise, a motherfucker,” van Peebles articulates his political strategy of transnational hybridization that moves between commercial, auteur-driven, and radical political aesthetics in order to address racial conflict in the United States of the 60s and 70s. Rather than always being about entertainment, however, this strategy highlights the way in which van Peebles isolates the Achilles heel of any industry in order to force it to carry his message, whether that be studio-driven films, art cinema, or independent cinema. Van Peebles articulates this strategy quite independently of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's works in which they discuss ‘minor literatures’ or ‘minor cinemas,’ but the resonance is worth bearing in mind for their argument that within each dominant mode of representation, there is a suppression of entire communities, which come to the fore when that articulation is played in a minor key.[3]

In their original articulation in *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (1975), Deleuze and Guattari compare minor literatures to “what blacks in America today are able to do with the English language,” referencing African American Vernacular English.[4] Van Peebles extends this kind of thinking into the realm of filmmaking. For example, Courtney Bates argues that van Peebles integrates “distinctly African American semiotic codes in order to subvert the mainstream origins of its story structure” in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. [5] I raise this reading of Peebles' work as a form of minor cinema to draw upon the articulation of the political potential of such works. In particular, Deleuze and Guattari argue that minor literatures/cinemas “express another possible community,” and “forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility.”[6] For van Peebles, this other sensibility shapes his political aesthetics of consciousness raising, and he is sensitive to the U.S. colonial legacy in a way that is particularly poignant in the context of his times, especially the events surrounding 1968 and global efforts then towards decolonization. Van Peebles's crucial extension of an argument such as Deleuze and Guattari articulate is not only that his films give voice to the under- or misrepresented, but that his work provides an alternative understanding of history. And in this case, racial history was being obfuscated in the United States in order to promote American exceptionalism. Van Peebles' work illustrates this process so remarkably especially because within his first three feature-length films he moves through three distinct industries and excavates those voices/histories in each.

In this trajectory, van Peebles maneuvers of a number of cinematic forms: second cinema, first cinema, and third cinema following his trilogy historically. I borrow this global heuristic of cinematic forms from Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino not only because their categorizations map onto van Peebles's trilogy, but also because he moves transnationally himself. Transnational movement is key to understanding van Peebles's politics because he positions his own racial critique of the United States in relation to global movements against colonialism and Empire. This becomes his way of providing a critical perspective on the 1960s U.S. civil rights movement. As Cynthia Young argues in *Soul Power*, such a perspective is needed:

“Characterized by racial myopia and North American exceptionalism, [a] New Left-centric historiography has diminished the influence of domestic movements for racial and economy equality and international liberation struggles.”[7]

Furthermore, in the 1960s and now, film industries also contribute to this notion of North American exceptionalism, through films like *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967). Van Peebles counters this by denying the suggestion of an emancipatory teleology moving towards a freer society by acknowledging the colonial underpinnings of the United States itself and their continued operation through cinematic institutions at the levels of genre, industry, and representation. Van Peebles's skepticism, contemporaneous with civil rights, finds validation for



*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, the Columbia Pictures film which van Peebles responds to directly in his own Columbia Pictures film, *Watermelon Man*.



Through its emphasis on a single relationship, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* circumvents structural critique.

us today in the continued critical race politics of Black Lives Matter.

In our own time, “entertainment-wise, a motherfucker” becomes the expression of a carefully articulated political strategy that presages a response to Mahnola Dargis and A.O. Scott’s article, “Watching While White: How Movies Tackled Race in 2016.” Scott notes a trend in films such as *Fences* (2016), *Hidden Figures* (2016), and *Loving* (2016) as they return to the 50s and 60s, “amid all the injustices and unresolved contradictions, civic progress, a sense of national purpose, and expansiveness” ... “without abandoning Hollywood feel-good conventions.”[8] As racial tension is on the rise in the United States, as I am writing from the beginning of 2018, the response these recent films from 2016 give to that tension resembles the studio response of the 1960s to the civil rights movement with films like *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. It’s a film which is not critical of racial tension as much as affirmative of certain liberal fallacies that mitigate real structural critique. This kind of cinematic narrative contributes, as Aziz Rana argues, to a

“vision of the country as intrinsically—if incompletely—liberal [that] systematically deemphasizes those forms of economic and political subordination that continue to mark the experience of historically marginalized communities.”[9]

The above films’ affective responses to civil rights issues disentangle contemporary structural inequality from the histories of colonialism and Empire. This contemporary repeat of the 60s has a film aesthetics that emphasizes a liberal teleology and affirmation of U.S. creedal politics,[10] especially in relation to Black Lives Matter, a movement that acknowledges that such a liberal teleology is a fallacy. Such a retrograde nostalgia about struggle in contemporary cinema emphasizes for me the importance of van Peebles’s transnational movements and connection to larger political aesthetics actively engaged with Empire. As Young notes,

“the appellation *Third World* served as a shorthand for leftists of color in the United States, signifying their opposition to a particular economic and racial world order.”[11]

Situating van Peebles’s work in relation to this political framework of U.S. colonial history illustrates the importance of his work both at home and abroad, as well as the massive positive response to a film like *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* among political groups like the Black Panthers. Young’s argument that these politics have been historically deemphasized also helps to explain van Peebles’s relatively quick decline in popularity and why *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* has quickly faded from U.S. consciousness, whereas *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* remains.

In fact, in 2017 *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* was inducted into the U.S. Library of Congress film registry, a seeming facile response to Black Lives Matters. This same year, I responded to the Society for Cinema and Media Studies committee’s call for Library of Congress nominations by supporting the induction of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* for its relevance given the contemporary political climate. The committee responded that they would indeed pass on my recommendation, but that this film had been recommended many times before to no avail. Given the history of its failed recommendation, I don’t make this point to isolate the individual choices of the Librarian of Congress, but to illustrate the ways in which structural affirmation of American exceptionalism proceeds. I would not deny the presence of significant political films in the National Film Registry,[12] but wish to illustrate that certain films get privileged by public memory and others do not, and also to identify what political issues cross the line of violating creedal narratives. The reconciliation of race relations in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* seems appropriate, whereas the police brutality and ensuing violence of films such as *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* and Haile Gerima’s

*Bush Mama* (1979) get left out. Analyzing this politics of selecting films for a national registry and preservation reveals several specific instances where the state has upheld American creedal narratives and marginalized radical politics. The particular instance here is part of a long, historical process.

To make an argument for understanding van Peebles's trilogy as a critique of American creedal narratives, I will start by situating this trilogy within its political moment. There was a dearth of films made by African Americans to which van Peebles responds, and a context of Black radical politics that shapes his response. I will then explain the importance of understanding his political approach. In this regard, I have found useful Jean-Luc Comolli and Paul Narboni's categorization of political cinemas, which identifies filmmaking approaches that alter dominant signifying regimes; such a categorization avoids capitulating to American creedal politics as industry standards. Significantly, in the case of van Peebles, his work is tied to his own global movement, which informs his political response to Empire – a key facet of political positions in the 1960s critical of American creedal politics. Finally, I will illustrate the ways in which each film approaches questions of Empire. Understanding van Peebles original trilogy as critical of Empire excavates its political importance for today, almost a half-century later, where many relatively popular 'political' films still observe conservative strategies that obfuscate the United States' colonial underpinnings.

## Lily-white unions and third world folks: the contradictions of American exceptionalism and Empire

In his self-written account of the making of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, van Peebles recounts his desire to go into filmmaking,

"The biggest obstacle to the Black revolution in America is our conditioned susceptibility to the white man's program... and it is with this starting point in mind and the intention to reverse the process that I went into cinema in the first fucking place." [13]

The more he became acquainted with the film industry, however, the more he realized that correcting racial representation was perhaps secondary to creating opportunities for African Americans to work in the U.S. film industry in fundamental roles. A key site of this challenge was working with unions within the "lily-White fortress," as he would later describe the film industry of the late 60s. [14] With the Columbia picture *Watermelon Man* under his belt, van Peebles decided that with *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, "I wanted 50% of my shooting crew to be third world people." [15] The dialectic he establishes here between the white majority industry and crews including people of color is important for two key reasons. First, rather than focus on racial representation, which the industry already began acknowledging in its own problematic way during this time, [16] he approaches race in terms of structural inequality and exclusion. Such an approach aligns with Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton in *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* with its focus on systemic thinking, and Aziz Rana's conception of a "settler empire." [17] Second, he explicitly uses the term 'third world' to refer to people of color, which implicates the U.S. role in global Empire, and aligns him with the political movements that have a transnational consciousness. [18] In each case, van Peebles worked against notions of American exceptionalism that were actively being articulated in the U.S. mainstream in response to civil rights movements.

The term *American exceptionalism* has been used to attempt to describe what makes the United States unique as a global power, from its resistance to communism to its seeming integration of diversity within its concept of the nation. For example, in *The First New Nation*, political scientist Seymour Martin Lipset argues that two key values, equality and achievement, mark this exceptionalism:



Police arrest a black revolutionary in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, integrating the civil rights protests directly into the narrative of the film.



The police officers proceed to beat the black protest leader.



One of the police officers says, "Don't mark his face," implicating the role of violence in upholding American exceptionalism.



The officers continue to beat the protest leader, as the protagonist Sweetback witnesses the political violence.



Sweetback in the moment he decides to resist against the police brutality, signaling a political shift in his subjectivity.

"The value we have attributed to achievement is a corollary to our belief in equality. For people to be equal, they need a chance to become equal. Success, therefore, should be attainable by all, no matter what the accidents of birth, class, or race."[19]

Lipset acknowledges that his account of American exceptionalism is an attempt to reconcile the presence of corruption and inequality in the United States with this ideology of achievement, but nonetheless what marks the country out as unique is that, unlike nations in Central and South America that subsequently broke away from colonial rule, the United States developed "a relatively integrated social structure." [20] The civil rights movement thus illustrates a key moment in articulating this process towards American exceptionalism, with its ideology of equality and achievement. Such exceptionalism, however, relies on a creedal narrative of the United States being defined against other colonial Empires.

By acknowledging U.S. colonial underpinnings, black radicals such as Carmichael and Hamilton establish links between the struggles for civil rights in the United States and larger decolonial movements abroad, such as those taking place in Africa and Asia. In this context, van Peebles' desire to hire 'third world folks' is not an offhand reference to race or class, but an articulation in line with those radicals. Rana explains this link between the United States and struggles abroad:

"Black radicals recognized [...] the struggle of nonwhite groups in the American interior was much like the struggle of nonwhite groups around the world. As Carmichael and Hamilton put it, the 'institutional racism' of the domestic United States ought to be known by 'another name: colonialism' [...] Twentieth-century black radicals thus imagined revolutionary reform in terms of decolonization. Independence movements in the third world were in the midst of fighting to transfer economic and political power from imperial elites to the historically colonized, and the same kind of transfer was necessary in the US." [21]

To return to van Peebles, this transfer of power might begin to take place through the director's navigation of film industries, from French, to American, and eventually to independent film production. It's a symbolic small-scale decolonization he achieves with *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. The Black Panther's endorsement of that film illustrates van Peebles's success in integrating into this larger conversation, with Huey P. Newton writing in *The Black Panther* that it would be required viewing for Panthers. [22]

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# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Poitier as physician and medical professor in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*.



Mrs. Drayton first upon first seeing Dr. John Prentice, as her daughter muses upon her future name, "Joanna Prentice I'll be."



The film cuts to Dr. Prentice's knowing expression.



And back to Mrs. Drayton as the realization of her daughter's fiancé's race sets in.

This dual articulation between an American creedal narrative of equality and the linking of 1960s U.S. politics to global politics of decolonization takes place within the film industry, albeit articulated quite differently in each case. Historically black filmmaking in the United States had long been a segregated industry, with 'race films' made with African American casts playing in African American theaters. This lasted until Micheaux's *The Betrayal* in 1948, and was followed by a dearth in African American film production. Between *The Betrayal* in 1948 and *Story of a Three Day Pass* in 1968, no African Americans were able to make feature films, and this latter film was made outside of the United States entirely. Melvin Donalson points to two main reasons:

"(1) the history of stereotypical screen images of blacks, and (2) the lack of a power base by blacks in the business of filmmaking." [23]  
[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

In the 60s as the Hollywood industry takes up the political sentiments of civil rights in its drive for greater African American representation, however, its response to these two issues reinforces American exceptionalism, rather than incorporate the more radical approach of Carmichael and Hamilton. Sidney Poitier's films during this period provide excellent examples of such integrative representation, as in films such as *The Defiant Ones* (1958), *Lilies of the Field* (1963), or *In the Heat of the Night* (1967). But principally it's a studio film and a white director, the immensely popular *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, distributed by Columbia and directed by Stanley Kramer, that serves as a key case study for its affective positioning of race relations.

Later lambasted by van Peebles in *Watermelon Man*, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* responds directly to Lipset's ideology of equality and achievement; it does so through dramatically questioning and then affirming liberal values. The film depicts the single day in which the wealthy San Franciscan Joanna Drayton (Katharine Houghton) returns from a trip to Hawaii with the world renowned Dr. John Prentice (Sidney Poitier) to tell her parents that they are going to get married. The central drama revolves around the Draytons' acceptance that their daughter might marry a black man (and so suddenly: they met 10 days prior and the film establishes a deadline structure by requiring the Draytons to accept or reject the situation that day). The Draytons are conflicted, because they raised their daughter according to America's creedal narrative of equality. As Joanna describes her father:

"my dad is a lifelong fighting liberal who loathes race prejudice and has spent his whole life fighting against discrimination."

Nonetheless, when confronted with a situation that asks him to enact these ideals, beyond referring to their black maid Tillie (Isabel Sanford) as "family," Mr. Drayton's (Spencer Tracy) indecision spans the entirety of the film. The film ends with an emotional monologue wherein he understands their love by remembering the genesis of his relationship with Mrs. Drayton (Katharine Hepburn), decreeing:

"and if it's half of what we felt... that's everything."

The remainder of the monologue is spent decrying the racist responses they will no doubt receive, and arguing that ultimately they must prevail. Such a speech is a clear analogy for the civil rights movement and an appeal to the creedal narrative.

The film cuts between all of the characters during the delivery of this final monologue, as the rapt soon-to-be family looks on, with tears on the eyes of Mrs.



Mr. Drayton after Dr. Prentice tells him that he has come back to San Francisco with the Draytons' daughter to marry her.



The only public conflict in the film, after a minor fender bender – the conflict ends with onlookers of all races applauding the young black man after he shouts that Mr. Drayton shouldn't be driving because he's too old.



*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* culminates with everyone coming together after Mr. Drayton's speech while "The Glory of Love" plays.

Drayton and Mrs. Prentice (Beah Richards) – no doubt the intended response of the audience as well. The thick pathos of the scene depends upon and accentuates an American exceptionalism that is affirmed in these moments: only in the United States could such a progressive stance be taken, and audiences are, presumably, emotionally moved by their own affirmation of core American values in the scene. Unceremoniously, the scene ends with Mr. Drayton bantering,

"Well, Tillie, when the hell are we going to get some dinner?"

This line's incongruity only serves to reinforce the emotional refrain that has just taken place, and they are ushered into the dining room with Jacqueline Fontaine's rendition of "The Glory of Love." The emotional end is no surprise in cinema's melodramatic navigation of domestic conflict standing in for larger societal issues, but its affirmation of Mr. Drayton's speech serves to obfuscate the critical race politics articulated by more radical civil rights leaders. In addition the film illustrates the two reasons Donalson gives for a dearth in African American filmmaking: stereotypical representation and lack of a power base. Poitier's character is undoubtedly a 'good stereotype,' but is nonetheless a stereotype. As van Peebles put it,

"Sidney was a wonderful actor, and we were proud, but nobody could really relate because the characters he was given to play were surreal, more from heaven than the 'hood.'"[24]

For van Peebles, the integration of Poitier's characters into the film industry served only as postwar "flag-waving to unite the nation," which illustrates van Peebles' acknowledgement of the industry's posturing in relation to American exceptionalism.[25]

\*\*\*\*\*

I turn now to analyze *Story of a Three Day Pass*, *Watermelon Man*, and *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* to provide examples of a different response than the 60s studio films from white directors. Van Peebles' films operate according to a critical race politics that acknowledge but refute industry operation along the lines of the creedal narrative outlined here. In doing so, they opt for a transnational politics of emancipation, rather than integration without equality. Through navigating the 60s and early 70s political economy and exploiting dominant aesthetic and industrial practices, van Peebles deftly maneuvers cinematic models of international art cinema, commercial cinema, and independent cinema respectively. I argue that he does not prefer one of these modes over the other, but that he finds ways in which to exploit each in order to find the ways in which an African American voice can build upon the representational opportunities offered by each. [20] Rather than the heavenly surrealism of Poitier, he presents a diverse set of images that contribute to the larger conversation surrounding and critiquing American Empire.

## Second, first, third: aesthetics out of joint and the transnational navigation of cinematic industries

The most significant aspect of van Peebles' early career is not only that he ended a 20-year gap in African American feature film production, but that he navigated three different modes of production to do so. This includes global sites of film production, France and America, but also industrial and aesthetic frameworks, first, second, and third cinema following Solanas and Getino's manifesto for a new form of political cinema. I take up the framework from Solanas and Getino's landmark essay, "Towards a Third Cinema," because of van Peebles' explicitly political motivations in entering the film industry, as well as the historical

accuracy by which their framework describes the types of filmmaking that van Peebles navigates, and the fact that their thinking is contemporaneous to the moment in which van Peebles operates. His transnational movement and transition from commercial to independent production was necessary for breaking into feature film production in the 1960s, however, because he was black.

These career moves resonate with the issues Donalson raises when describing impediments to African American film production: first, van Peebles turned to filmmaking with his short films produced in 1950s San Francisco in order to correct negative stereotypes of African Americans in the U.S. film industry; second, he navigated the lack of a power base of African Americans by leaving the United States entirely. While moving abroad allowed him to uniquely maneuver the U.S. film industry, it is also significant that he approached each industry he worked in critically rather than simply working in the mode of said industry. By playing each industry in a minor key, an appropriate analogy for van Peebles who was also a musician, he actively engaged with global movements towards decolonization and implicated the United States' colonial past in the politics of the 1960s and 1970s.

Solanas and Getino published their manifesto "Towards a Third Cinema" one year after making their film which would embody its principles, *Hour of the Furnaces* (1968). The manifesto, with a specific interest in the ways that cinematic practices from the United States influenced Argentinian film production, denounced neocolonialism for overwriting local cinematic styles and bringing with it American ideologies as well. The authors considered cinema in this regard to be no less than part of the larger neocolonial apparatus by which North America exerted control over and exploited the resources of South America. They called for a radically different type of cinema in terms of production, exhibition, and the ways in which politics were delivered cinematically, which they would call third cinema. They argued that this type of cinema "can be found in the revolutionary opening towards a cinema outside and against the System, in a cinema of liberation." [26] They acknowledged that in Europe, art cinema was being produced in a distinctly different style from the commercial cinema of the United States, and they called this second cinema. For Solanas and Getino, second cinema had political potential but ultimately could not deliver a political message because these filmmakers "have already reached, or are about to reach, the outer limits of what the system permits." [27] They called Hollywood first cinema, not because of a particular historical trajectory, nor because of cold war frameworks that might position the United States as part of the 'first world,' but because of the position of power Hollywood occupied in a larger neocolonial hierarchy that spanned from commercial cinema that supported majoritarian economic and ideological models, to art cinema/second cinema that was individual and potentially political, and finally to a cinema of decolonization/third cinema that directly critiques structures of power.

In their manifesto, Solanas and Getino argue that the role of third cinema is consciousness raising, also an important part of the radical black politics of the 1960s, which are reflected in van Peebles's cinematic politics. Solanas and Getino introduce the concept of the 'film act,' an understanding of film-viewing as an event that includes three facets:

- "The participant comrade, the man-actor-accomplice who responded to the summons [of the film/filmmaker];
- The free space where that man expressed his concerns and ideas, became politicised, and started to free himself; and
- The film, important only as a detonator or pretext." [28]

Rather than provide the commercial experience of film as entertainment, third cinema aspires to create events that cross the lines between film viewing and a political rally. The viewer, in their perspective, should leave the experience



critically engaged, quite the opposite of a creedal affirmation insofar as creedal narratives affirm dominant ideologies. Broadly speaking, this suggests a relatively straightforward alignment between van Peeble's critique of American exceptionalism and third cinema, but I do not want to over-determine this relation because there are at least two key differences: First, rather than privileging a non-commercial space for the transformation of subjectivity, van Peebles sneaks this experience into as many markets *qua* modes of production as possible. Second, van Peebles delves deeply into the subjectivity of his characters, an approach that Solanas and Getino align with the auteurist second cinema and critique as only "an attempt at decolonization." [29] As Rachel Gabara argues,

"Third Cinema, to the contrary [of art cinema], was interested in the People, in popular history and living conditions, and not at all in individual psychology." [30]

In *Contemporary Political Cinema*, I argue that that the approach of so-called 'minor cinemas,' which I here suggest resonate with van Peebles's work, aligns with many of the political principles of third cinema, but it departs in its emphasis on individual stories or subjectivities. [31] Likewise, van Peebles's approach deftly navigates a number of industrial frameworks, but even extends the principles of third cinema as well, by illustrating how the political aims of third cinema might come from within any industry, if the director acts as interlocutor by making decisive breaks with the modes and practices of said industry.

In this way, van Peebles directly responds to the ideological structures that determine practices and aesthetics that emerge from the industries he works within. Comolli and Narboni, in their famous essay "Cinema/ Ideology/ Criticism." [32], posit a number of approaches political cinema might take in response to the ideological structures of film industries. In this essay, the authors give seven categories of political cinema, A through G, with varying levels of political content. But first, they argue, "*Every film is political*, inasmuch it is determined by the ideology which produces it," though there are certain forms which are undoubtedly more political than others. [33] If we think through van Peebles first three feature films using Comolli and Narboni's framework, it reveals how quickly and adeptly he navigates a number of approaches to political cinema, moving towards the more critical end of the spectrum with each film.

His first film, *Story of a Three Day Pass*, conforms to their category D: films having "explicitly political content... but which do not effectively criticize the ideological system in which they are embedded because they unquestioningly adopt its language and imagery." [34] *Story of a Three Day Pass* was made within the context of and is at least similar to the French New Wave, which its jazzy, youthful style reflects, albeit with a narrative that focuses explicitly on race. *Watermelon Man* operates according to category E:

"films which seem at first sight to belong firmly within the ideology and to be completely under its sway, but which turn out to be so only in an ambiguous manner... the films we are talking about throw up obstacles in the way of ideology, causing it to swerve and get off course." [35]

At first sight, *Watermelon Man* appears to be a typical studio comedy, although van Peebles consciously throws up obstacles that begin to break down the ideological function Comolli and Narboni associate with studio films. Finally, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* achieves category B. These are

"films which attack their ideological assimilation on two fronts. Firstly, by direct political action, on the level of the 'signified'... linked with a breaking down of the traditional way of depicting reality... Economic/political and formal action have to be indissolubly wedded." [36]



The title, "Starring the black community" at the beginning of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* illustrates van Peebles's active approach to casting and crewing his film.

In this film, political form and content are wedded, thus it is no surprise that here van Peebles produces the most radical political message of his films, a message to which Huey P. Newton and the Panthers responded.

Before providing a political analysis of the form and content of van Peebles's films, I will quickly situate each in its historical moment in order to provide the context of how he navigates the previously mentioned categories. I provide this historical trajectory separate from individual analysis of the films in order to clearly articulate van Peebles' political development in relation to global geopolitics. In this respect, I answer Christina Gerhardt and Sara Saljoughi's call in *1968 and Global Cinema* to think outside a "center-periphery model" and instead to "consider the relationships among social movements globally," and to consider "how the global interplay of the 1960s shifted film language." [37] In the case of van Peebles, I argue that he moves between different spaces and industries, but rather than keep them distinct in his films, he modifies one with the other in order to critique whichever industry he currently works within.

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# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

In the 1960s, van Peebles was invited by Henri Langlois to show his short films at the Cinémathèque Française, and presumably it was there that he learned more about the French film industry – in particular the funds available for first time directors, and the general desire to see young directors get their start on the heels of the French New Wave.[38] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) In order to access these funds, van Peebles became a French writer, writing for newspapers, and eventually writing five novels in French.[39] In 1967, using French funding, he made the fiction feature, *Story of a Three Day Pass*. This film was made in the style of the French New Wave but with a story about race and U.S. Empire rather than young Parisians on the lam. The film follows a U.S. soldier stationed in Paris who falls in love with a white Parisian woman and in turn gets disowned by his fellow soldiers who report him to his captain. The captain rescinds his three-day pass and restricts him to the barracks for miscegenation; in this regard, it is worth noting that van Peebles was married to Maria Marx at the time, a white German woman with whom he had several children. Not only did the film receive critical acclaim abroad, it also played at the San Francisco Film Festival, where it received Hollywood attention. The great irony of van Peebles's success at the festival in the city where he first started making films, however, was that he attended as the French delegate, championed by festival director Albert Johnson, who was both an advocate for African American filmmakers and a critic with interests in both global art cinema and third cinema.[40] As a result, his transnational movement explains how van Peebles addressed Donaldson's second point, "the lack of a power base by blacks in the business of filmmaking," since the film's critical acclaim allowed him to enter the Hollywood studio system proper with Columbia's *Watermelon Man*.

While he was able to successfully parlay his work on *Three Day Pass* into making *Watermelon Man*, working in the studio system proved deeply unsatisfying for van Peebles. As someone who envisioned himself an auteur, moving from a context which supported his creative vision (France in the 1960s), he now faced the restrictions of the U.S. studio system. The film follows Jeff Gerber, your average white suburban insurance agent, who wakes up one morning black. Eventually, Gerber leaves the insurance agency that has been exploiting black communities and forms his own company that serves these same communities. The screenplay was originally written by Herman Raucher, who considered the screenplay to indicate his participation in the civil rights movement. He penned the story to lampoon his liberal friends who were liberal regarding race only on face value, not unlike the theme of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. In partial conflict with Raucher's original vision, van Peebles changed key plot points, however, taking the story away from an affirmation of American exceptionalism of the kind seen in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. *Watermelon Man* was another critical, and this time financial, success. Because of his success as a studio director, Columbia offered van Peebles a three picture deal. As the story goes, instead he made *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. [41] In the following sections, I will examine the way he brought his experiences in France working as an auteur to bear upon the restrictive studio system. However, ultimately it was his desire to work outside of these restrictions that prompted him to move from his "first cinema" film to his "third cinema" film with *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*.

While van Peebles himself never uses the term third cinema, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* shares a number of features with Solanas and Getino's manifesto since it develops an explicit critique of colonial structures in the United States that exclude people of color. This is clear from the narrative, where the



hero Sweetback runs from and successfully escapes the police – “the man” – after preventing two officers from beating a black revolutionary. More significantly, van Peebles followed many of Solanas and Getino’s principles in the production of this film. Van Peebles demanded that at least fifty-percent of the crew be “third world folks,” difficult at the time because the film production unions were, in his words, lily-white. Other features include location shooting, the use of non-professional actors and community members, shooting on 16mm, editing according to concept and rhythm rather than narrative continuity, and creating a space for discussion after and through film exhibition. Rather than mirroring the polished, studio-style of *Watermelon Man*, stylistically the film is extremely idiosyncratic, which is not surprising considering van Peebles wrote, directed, produced, starred-in, edited, and composed its music. It proceeds not according to a clear narrative, but uses what van Peebles referred to as ‘globs’[42] – conceptual material he would shoot with the cast and crew on hand at that day, which added to the expressive nature of the film.

*Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* did not offer up a wholesale rejection of Hollywood cinema, however, but something closer to what Mike Wayne discusses in *Political Film: The Dialectics of Third Cinema*. Wayne suggests many films exist less as a pure form of political or commercial cinema and instead oscillate between these modes, and their messages “change as they do so.”[43] Van Peebles’ wanted to make a political intervention with his film, but he also acknowledged the fact that his film would not have an impact if people did not come out to see it. I discussed his approach in the introduction to this article: van Peebles argued that *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* had to be “entertainment-wise, a motherfucker.”[44] Rather than suggesting that this film would be a commercial film with political content, like *Watermelon Man*, however, *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* is explicitly political, closer to Solanas and Getino’s third cinema, but injected with commercial scenes and styles meant to engage and entertain audiences, ranging from chase-sequences, to musical interludes, to pornographic content. And like Solanas and Getino’s third cinema manifesto, van Peebles’s film embraces the anti-colonial political sentiment of the 1960s.

While *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* is the most obvious frame of reference for understanding van Peebles as a political filmmaker, my approach here suggests that his third film was the culmination of a much larger project. Reflecting on his impetus for going into filmmaking in the first place, he recounted in 1971:

“The biggest obstacle to the Black revolution in America is our conditioned susceptibility to the white man’s program. In short, the fact is that the white man has colonized our minds. We’ve been violated, confused and drained by this colonization and from this brutal, calculated genocide, the most effective and vicious racism has grown, and it is with this starting point in mind and the intention to reverse the process that I went into cinema in the first fucking place.”[45]

With this message in mind, van Peebles set out to make a film to begin the process of decolonization. Like the writers of third cinema manifestos – Julio Garcia Espinosa, Getino, Glauber Rocha, and Solanas[46] – van Peebles’s work suggests that such a process could not come through the usual channels, because industries and aesthetics produce ideologies. In the following sections, I will illustrate the ways in which he plays various approaches to film in a minor key in order to deliver a critical race politics that provides expression not only for another community, but another history as well.

**Stationed in France: *Story of a Three Day Pass* and the emergence of an auteur**

Imaged from *Story of a Three Day Pass*:



Turner peruses books on the Seine.



Turner drinking Byrrh.



Turner watches a striptease.



The introduction of Nicole Berger, a Nouvelle Vague veteran.



Turner's psyche splits, with one side espousing epithets that illustrate his internalized racism.

*Story of a Three Day Pass* details a short period of time in which an African American soldier Turner (Harry Baird) receives a 'three day pass' or off-station leave while stationed in France, during which he meets the white Parisian Miriam (Nicole Berger) at a jazz club. They begin a romantic relationship, which is cut short when they are caught vacationing on a beach by Turner's fellow soldiers. The mere suggestion of miscegenation becomes enough for Turner to have his three-day pass revoked. The film resembles other films in the style of the French New Wave, unsurprising since it made in France using first-time director state funding, French crews, and French talent. With its focus on U.S. race-relations, however, it makes use of features commonly associated with the French New Wave in a way that suggests it simultaneously stands apart from that film movement. Through van Peebles's editing and sound design, the film makes an anti-colonial argument regarding the use of colonized peoples as troops by revealing a biopolitical apparatus within the United States military that restricts and controls the rights and actions of African American soldiers.

I define *Story of a Three Day Pass* as being 'in the style of the French New Wave' because van Peebles is an outsider and latecomer to the wave's boom in the late 1950s and early 1960s, while I also want to acknowledge how the film's aesthetics are informed and made possible by the French New Wave as a predecessor. I am also careful to disentangle van Peebles's own aesthetic interventions here from the French New Wave, such as his use of music that carries across all of his films. At the same time, van Peebles's development as an auteur was made possible by his emerging from an auteur-friendly industry and he incorporates a set of qualities that might be thought of as a nod to young French directors that came before him. In the film, after the soldier receives his three-day pass, Turner wanders the streets of Paris like one of François Truffaut or Jean-Luc Godard's aimless characters, visiting book vendors on the Seine, chasing girls, drinking Byrrh at a café, visiting burlesque theaters and dance halls. These sequences are shot in a fragmentary way, on location in the streets, with sudden cuts and close-ups amidst crowds on sidewalks or in clubs. The sense such filming and editing gives is that Turner himself has stepped into the same culture that the French New Wave depicted earlier. In this way, Turner's physical exploration of the city is accentuated by the film's aesthetic reflection on an earlier film tradition that similarly explored the city. Of course, the crew is also mainly French, and lead actress Nicole Berger is a French New Wave veteran, having previously acted in films by Eric Rohmer, Godard, and Truffaut. What characterizes this production process as different from a French New Wave film is that van Peebles consciously injects Turner's racialized psyche into the film through his interaction with French characters, as well as through editing and sound design.

Linking U.S. race politics to the French New Wave constitutes van Peebles's first transnational move, from which my article takes its title, but even more significantly he addresses the global politics of the U.S. Empire through the film's critical consideration of the military use of African American soldiers. Just a year prior to van Peebles making *Story of a Three Day Pass*, the Black Panther Party called for "all black men to be exempt from military service," for the reason that they should refuse to "fight and kill other people of color in the world who, like black people, are being victimized." [47] Such an argument situates African Americans as colonial troops. In this light, a politics of global, anti-colonial solidarity would call for withdrawal from the operations of the U.S. Empire's military interventions. A year later, *Story of a Three Day Pass* makes a similar argument in this respect. The film begins with Turner having a conversation with himself in the mirror about a potential promotion he might receive, but the film formally fragments Turner, first via sound design, and then by visually fragmenting his self through two, simultaneous frames. Turner's psyche takes on a slightly different voice, accentuated by a hollowness that seems to mark it out as not physically present – although curiously enough, the 'disembodied' voice is the one on the left in the image I include here, which is not underexposed like the



Turner encounters other black communities, but remains separate.



Turner's psyche once again splits, this time separated by costume and a shot reverse-shot pattern.



This over the shoulder shot shows Turner's psyche in the mirror, wearing a military uniform, suggesting a relation between the military/empire and his internalized racism.

'real Turner' on the right. The disembodied voice tells Turner,

"Yeah, you'll get [the promotion]. Yeah you're pretty sure to get it... Uncle Tom."

This moment is the first in a series of conversations Turner has with his self and demarcates the central concern of the film: his role in the United States military as an African American, including what is expected of him in terms of his future opportunities and also in terms of the way he is allowed to interact with the local population in France.

The script's focus on Turner's integration into white French society alongside his psychic acknowledgement that such integration is impossible continues throughout the film. As he explores the city, he runs into other black communities, but while he waves to black people in mutual acknowledgement, he does not join them in conversation. The emphasis on these moments remind the viewer that this is not a simple question of confidence for Turner, but a racially enforced relation between a white society with a history of colonization and a visitor from a country that understands its relation to race quite differently. When Turner returns to his hotel after asking Miriam to go to the beach with him, his split psyche emerges again. He tells himself in the mirror, "I'm sure she'll come," to which his other self replies, "Don't count your chickens before they've hatched, baby. She ain't coming." Earnestly he tells his other self to the mirror, "I hope she comes." These scenes where Turner's psyche splits and he speaks to himself in this manner are literal manifestations of van Peebles's argument that "the white man has colonized [African American] minds." [48]

Frantz Fanon made an argument about such a fragmenting of subjectivity earlier in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), based on his experience travelling from Martinique, a French colony, to France to study medicine. Turner's move from the United States to France, however, is almost the opposite of Fanon's transition from Martinique to France. While both find a metaphysical split as they interact with white populations, in *Story of a Three Day Pass*, Turner does not find this split in France, but brings it from the United States with him – and at times he seemingly finds this fissure mitigated in his interaction with French locals. Fanon describes this psychic split:

"the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he has had to place himself. His metaphysics, or, less pretentiously, his customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him." [49]

In Turner's case, the civilization he finds himself in conflict with is white American civilization at large, and more specifically United States military command. While his psyche often comes across as antagonistic, intervening when Turner behaves too optimistically, a later conversation with Miriam illustrates that he acknowledges his racialized role as, following black radical politics, a colonial soldier in the U.S. Empire. When Miriam says, "I like your captain. He must be nice to give you a three-day pass and a promotion," Turner replies, "No no no, he thinks I'm a good negro." "Good negro, what is it?" she asks. He explains: "To my captain? That's a negro you can trust. Trust to be cheerful, obedient, and frightened." This kind of reflection, then, is also brought to the fore on the soundtrack through the audio collaboration between Mickey Baker and van Peebles. [50]





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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



A freeze frame on Miriam's smiling face as she and Turner travel by car through the French countryside to the ocean.

While most of the soundtrack is made up of Mickey Baker's jazz guitar, van Peebles intervenes with discordant, jarring notes that often punctuate what would otherwise be a relatively standard non-diegetic soundtrack. While, in visual terms, quick cuts and sudden close-ups were used previously in the sequence in which Turner explores Paris, these jarring cuts are even more pronounced half-way through his trip with Miriam to the beach. During this sequence, sudden cuts become freeze-frames while guitar riffs override the soundtrack. The film freezes on close-ups of Miriam's thighs or calves as she stretches out in the car, marking the sexual tension of the scene. During the sequence, the narrative cuts back and forth between the sexualized images of Miriam's body and her smiling face, or as she explains something to Turner, with shots of the landscape they pass through as well.



A close up of Miriam's thighs as discordant guitar chords suddenly cut through the previously upbeat jazz underscoring.



The film begins to cut back and forth between suggestive shots of Miriam, and her talking, engaged in conversation with Turner.



Each time the film cuts to her thighs or ankles, the discordant guitar once again cuts through the soundtrack.



Interspersed throughout are shots of countryside, until they reach the ocean.

When landscape or Miriam's face appears, the soundtrack provides jazzy, upbeat underscoring, accentuating their excitement at their impromptu beachside trip. While the jarring cuts and chords have a relatively straightforward narrative purpose, suggesting that this is a romantic affair and not merely a trip with a new friend, van Peebles pushes this further when they consummate their budding relationship. Beyond *Story of a Three Day Pass*, this style also marks out an aesthetic strategy that van Peebles will apply across all three films discussed in this article. While each iteration suits the individual film, it illustrates the director's early interest in manipulating the commercial practices of continuity editing in order to introduce a critical race politics.



Turner as French aristocracy in his sexual fantasy.

The pattern of radical interjection develops in the direction of a critical race politics in *Story of a Three Day Pass* during the first romantic encounter between the couple. While they are having sex in their hotel room, the film suddenly begins to cut between their embrace and far-removed scenes, first the seeming fantasies of each, and then actual events in the world accompanied again by the discordant guitar. As the couple lay down together on the bed, the camera first zooms into Turner's head and the film cuts to a fantasy sequence where Turner is a member of the French aristocracy, complete with fancy dress and a countryside manor, which leads into a romantic encounter with Miriam. Next, the camera zooms into Miriam's head, and the following fantasy sequence depicts her being captured by an African tribe, which leads to Turner showing up to initiate a romantic encounter.

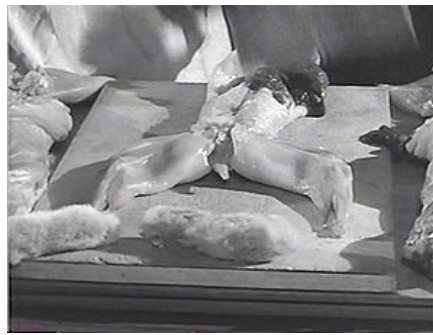


Miriam being captured in her sexual fantasy.



Turner appears in Miriam's fantasy.

Turner's fantasy is accompanied by classical strings, whereas Miriam's is accompanied by a tribal drumbeat, but as the film returns to their real lovemaking, the film's previous underscoring resumes. This time, however, sudden cuts interject less fantastical images, as the jarring guitar returns from the previous scene. Whereas the fantasy worlds were coherent, the interjection of images from the historical world are introduced as a disruption. These images include found footage from World War II, meat being chopped, police brutality, dead bodies being carried on a plank, military maneuvers with helicopters and troops, and a reenacted race-protest.



Meat being chopped, immediately after Turner and Miriam begin their lovemaking, which foreshadows the brutality against actual human bodies that follows.



A man wearing a military uniform kicking a civilian onto the ground, intercut with Turner and Miriam's lovemaking.





A civilian being beaten with a baton, intercut with Turner and Miriam's lovemaking.



A corpse being carried on a stretcher, intercut with Turner and Miriam's lovemaking.



The final sequence intercut with Turner and Miriam's lovemaking, which starts with a reenacted race protest.



The reenacted race protest sequence ends with Turner whistling to the protesters to get their attention while he and Miriam embrace and kiss.

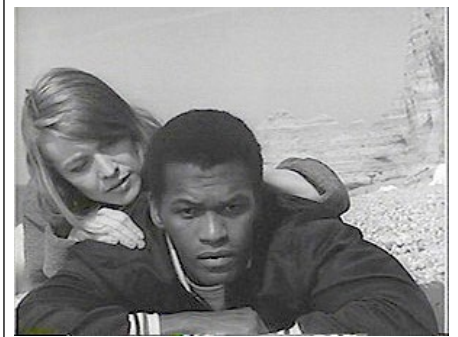
In the last sequence, with the reenacted race-protest, Turner whistles from a rooftop and the camera tilts and pans to show him beckoning to Miriam, as she comes forward to kiss him, suggesting both acknowledge that their tryst will upset certain populations (and that, perhaps, they don't really care). While their diegetic sex is uninterrupted and seemingly pleasurable for both, the disjunctive editing riddles their lovemaking with the history of colonialism and its aftereffects. This editing suggests, like Turner's 'other' self, that his present relationship is too good to be true.

While together, Miriam and Turner's relationship seems as if it might end along the happy lines of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, with a relationship freed from, or at least relatively unencumbered by, social norms, but the film's conclusion returns to the critical race politics informed by van Peebles's formal interventions – through the splitting of the self through the use of two frames, the discordant guitar riffs, and his intercutting history into their passionate romance. After Turner's fellow soldiers see Miriam and Turner together at the beach, Turner bemoans, "I guess I just lost my promotion." Miriam, seeming not to understand the seriousness of racial politics in the United States, remains upbeat, suggesting that the other soldiers won't report anything to his captain. Miriam seems completely smitten with Turner, and in a passionate monologue tells him that she's decided she's "not going to be 'sick' anymore," unless with him – sickness being her excuse for leaving work in order to go to the beach. Eventually she wins him over and he agrees, "You're right, they probably won't say anything." This upbeat note is cut short by Turner's psyche, who glibly decries, "I'm not so sure!" The film instantly cuts to Turner's captain demoting him and restricting him to base.

This conclusion cements the African American soldier's role in U.S. Empire in line with the Black Panthers' decree: African Americans are situated as colonial troops, part of the U.S. military arm but biopolitically separate from its sovereign citizens. At the same time, van Peebles takes his conclusion one step further. Through a stroke of luck, a contingent of African American women show up to tour the military base and lodge a plea with the captain, so Turner gets his leave reinstated. As soon as one of the women hands him his papers, he immediately makes a dash for the base telephone and calls Miriam's workplace, which informs him that Miriam is "not here... she's sick." With this devastating ending, the film suggests that the viewer should have known all along, already clued in by all of van Peebles's hints in the form of disjunctive sound design and editing. Turner's psyche steps in one last time to say, "Hey baby, I could've told you." He replies, "Fuck you," and tosses himself on his bunk. With this conclusion, van Peebles maintains a radical politics rather than return to American exceptionalism through a liberal belief that everything would work out in the end. Here, the "Glory of Love," to cite *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner's* ending theme, is not enough to end racial prejudice.



Turner's fellow soldiers, upon seeing him with Miriam – the sequence ends with one of the soldiers saying ominously, "But we'll tell everyone we saw you."

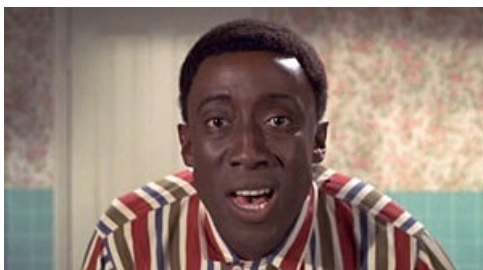


Turner's expression after meeting his fellow soldiers, and saying, "I guess I just lost my promotion."

Images from *Watermelon Man*:



Actor Godfrey Cambridge in whiteface, at the beginning of *Watermelon Man*.



Cambridge when he first sees himself in the mirror after waking up black.

## Black skin, whiteface: *Watermelon Man* and industry insurgency

After van Peebles's success with *Story of a Three Day Pass*, he was contacted by Columbia Pictures who was looking for an African American to direct *Watermelon Man*.<sup>[51]</sup> [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Columbia Pictures also distributed *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and was no doubt looking to capitalize on this earlier film's success. While *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* has provided a foil for my argument in this article, this is not simply a historical comparison on my part, but a dynamic that van Peebles responded to in the early 1970s directly through referencing the earlier film. That is, in *Watermelon Man* after Jeff Gerber (Godfrey Cambridge, who wears whiteface until he becomes black) begins to come to terms with the fact he has woken up black, he calls his wife Althea (Estelle Parsons) and tells her, "Guess who's coming to dinner?" As I mentioned previously, Raucher, the writer of *Watermelon Man*, and van Peebles wrestled over the film's relation to the political climate of the civil rights. Van Peebles's struggle with the screenwriter is emblematic of his response to Columbia's earlier film, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, as its popularity on the national stage represented a large scale acceptance of the U.S. creedal narrative and American exceptionalism. Van Peebles's response here was to take the job offered, direct a studio film as a token African American for the company, and modify studio practices so that the eventual product was no longer just a "studio film" but an auteur-altered film with a critical message about racial liberalism in the United States.

Whereas *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* has innocuous characters, in the beginning of *Watermelon Man* Gerber is outwardly racist. His peers dislike him, partly because of how overtly racist he is, though the film takes aim at his family and co-workers' racism as well. The first time viewers witnesses Gerber's usual morning routine, which will be disrupted by his waking up black, he makes severely racist jokes on three occasions while no one around him shares his laughter. He boxes an imaginary Muhammad Ali during his morning exercise





Gerber telling an imaginary Muhammad Ali, "You're a credit to your race."



Gerber jokes about the driver having to drive from the back of the bus, "back in the ol' days, in the good ol' south."



Mantan Moreland laughs along at Gerber's racist joke, with a critical hyperbole that references his history of working in minstrel shows.



Althea's reticence to sleep with her husband after he becomes black.

routine, telling the punching bag, "You're a credit to your race." He yells at his African American bus driver, "In the good ol' days, back in the ol' south, you'd have to drive from back here! Get it? Back of the bus!" He asks the counterman at his usual café, Joe, significantly played by Mantan Moreland, "Was there any rioting in the streets last night?" Then after this politically charged question he says,

"Hey no offense about that looting remark... I know you don't go for that sort of thing... and of course if you DID, it would be very hard for the police to identify you. I mean an hour later... all you cats look alike!"

Rather than suggest that just a segment of society is racist, as does *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, van Peebles presents the viewer with a caustic racist character who espouses a range of racist sentiments so that the film will directly indict racism in the United States.

Gerber's wife Althea is his liberal antithesis. When Gerber decries the news of racial unrest on the television in the beginning of the film, Althea responds, "I think white people need to show greater interest and understanding." Over the course of the film, however, these two positions are reversed as Gerber lives as an African American and Althea is presented not just with television stories but an actual relationship with the now black Gerber. In addition, the change in Gerber is not only skin deep: his previously caustic attitude which draws disdain from those around him becomes tempered and Gerber emerges as an honest, likeable man. That makes it clear that Althea's choice to leave Gerber is not based on personality, but on the fact that he is now a black man. *Watermelon Man* punctuates this shift with Althea's refusal to sleep with the now-black Gerber, a reversal of her previously unrequited affections, so that the film continues van Peebles's focus on the fear of miscegenation that was seen in *Story of a Three-Day Pass*. Unlike the challenge to liberal ideologies in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, which are eventually overcome in the name of American exceptionalism, van Peebles here suggests that when ultimately confronted with racial integration, such liberal ideologies may not hold up. This key distinction between acceptance of liberalism and its critique illustrate the conflict between scriptwriter Raucher and director van Peebles: though Raucher's intended contribution to the civil rights was indeed a critique of white liberalism – one might say that for van Peebles, Raucher simply did not take this critique far or seriously enough.

The studio's original vision of the film, and Raucher's, was to have the film end with Gerber waking up one morning white again and relieved. Van Peebles took issue with the suggestion that living as a black man was a nightmare. He told the studio he was going to film two endings, the one they desired and his own. Instead, he only shot his own ending: he recounts,

"I sort of had final cut on *Watermelon Man* by simply breaking my word and not shooting a disputed scene the two ways we had agreed on, the way they wanted it and the way I wanted it—'... and then we will [pat-pat] see later, Mel....'"[52]

In his ending, Jeff Gerber leaves his insurance agency that has been exploiting black communities and forms his own that serves these same communities. Gerber also visits an African American bar, where despite a shakedown by a pair of white police officers, he appears more at home in his skin than he has at any other time in the film. The final shot of the film shows Gerber in his new exercise routine – "I'm working out in the evenings now," he tells Althea – practicing self-defense with brooms and mops in a room full of other black men, a clear nod to the Black Panthers and the necessity for African Americans to protect themselves in the United States. The image I include here depicts the final shot of the film, a freeze frame on Gerber's face, mid strike, as he practices in the martial arts studio, cementing this argument. He revealed the fact that he only shot his ending late





Gerber, finally comfortable in his own skin, dances along to music in the bar ("Soul'd on You" by Melvin van Peebles).



The final freeze frame of the film, as Gerber practices self-defense as his new exercise regimen, a nod to the Black Panthers Party for Self-Defense.

enough in production that the studio had no choice but to go with it, but he received no backlash as the film went on to become another success.

Racquel Gates extrapolates the political significance of various ways in which van Peebles describes his motivations for making *Watermelon Man*. In her analysis of *Watermelon Man*, she argues that the film "stands as a testament to van Peebles's difficult, but ultimately successful, ambition to criticize Hollywood's and society's racism 'from the inside out.'" [53] Gates develops three distinct ways in which van Peebles's critique comes, using his words, 'from the inside out':

1. "Van Peebles wisely decided to choose his battles with Columbia when it came to casting the film: he insisted that an African American actor play the lead and petitioned for Mantan Moreland to be added in a supporting role, but left the rest of the casting decisions to the studio.
2. Van Peebles also interjected in ways that the studio likely deemed insignificant at the time, such as composing his own musical score for the film. The experimental jazz/blues/funk compositions, however, added a level of dissonance to many of the images in the film.
3. And when he anticipated studio objections, Van Peebles simply lied or withheld important information, such as when he told executives that he had shot two endings for the film, but in reality, only filmed one." [54]

As Gates illustrates, key choices such as these allowed van Peebles to manipulate industry practices, which she argues results in a "hybridized" film, straddling "independent cinema and Hollywood film." [55] Her argument informs my position that *Watermelon Man* blurs the lines between first and second cinema, marked by van Peebles' desire for artistic control and a clear political message that was fostered in France.

Van Peebles imprints his auteur's stamp on the studio film, *Watermelon Man*, marking the film out as a hybrid between Solanas and Getino's first and second cinemas. This hybridization clashes with the ideology of American exceptionalism, cementing the film's radically different approach when compared to *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. His stamp in *Watermelon Man* is particularly notable where he interjects his own music and lyricism into the soundtrack, disjunctively interrupting at times a more classical underscoring. These interjections are similar to those in *Story of Three Day Pass*, albeit without the discordance of the guitar, favoring instead his own musical style. In addition to being an author and a filmmaker, van Peebles is a musician with seven records to his name, and his spoken-word style has been credited as being a foundational influence on modern rap music. Most notably, van Peebles wrote the hit "Love, that's America," for *Watermelon Man*, a song that he later released on the album *As Serious as a Heart-Attack*, and that song was taken up by Occupy Wall Street protesters as an anthem in 2011. [56] The track is introduced alongside overlaid titles at the critical juncture in which Gerber tells his boss that he refuses to exploit the black community, and it includes lyrics such as, "This ain't America is it? Oh lord where can I be," and "In America, folks don't run through the streets blood streaming from where they've been beat." During the sequence in which this song plays, framed text superimposes freeze-frames, with lines like, "be a credit to your race" and "You get used to the smell... and there's a lot to be grateful for and..." as if van Peebles is imprinting his own political commentary directly on the images themselves. Whereas Solanas and Getino caution that industry limits the auteur's politics, *Watermelon Man* provides an instance where van Peebles weaponized his status as an auteur.

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<p>As Gerber begins to think about his job in insurance sales more critically after becoming black, he worries less about profits and more what is right for the black communities he serves.</p>	<p>His boss attempts to reorient him towards making profits off of black communities, and van Peebles interjects with his own stylized titles that make the subtext clear.</p>
	
<p>His second doctor, after his white doctor refers him to a black doctor, tells him, "You're wrong to go on trying to fool yourself," and again the title provides the inference, "You're a negro!"</p>	<p>Fed up with the ethics of insurance sales, Gerber finds a job at the dump, where his co-worker tells him that someone on their crew has been working there for 13 years – this title suggests a complacency, which Gerber goes on to reject by starting his own insurance company.</p>

The interventions that Gates highlights, and her notion of a critique from the “inside out” are crucial for two different reasons. One, describing his approach to the Hollywood system as such highlights van Peebles’s unique way of navigating diverse industries while maintaining his critique of American Exceptionalism. Two, the “inside out” gestures towards the potential for a radical politics within the industry itself. If radical black politics during the civil rights movement took quite a different tack than those that followed an American creedal narrative, they nonetheless were internal to and present within the United States. In some ways, this alternative approach comes to fruition through greater African American participation in the film industry, though with varying degrees of critical edge as studios attempt to maintain economic control through the ensuing Blaxploitation films. Van Peebles comes away with another message after making *Watermelon Man*, however: working within the studios system does not satisfy his desire for control nor offer the opportunity to deliver his own message unencumbered. As a result, he turns away from the studios with *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*. Nonetheless, just as Gates positions *Watermelon Man* as a hybrid film, *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* crosses generic boundaries, by oscillating between a radical political message and a desire for entertainment to deliver the film’s politics.

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### Third cinema in the United States: *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* and the transnational critique of American Exceptionalism

While Columbia offered van Peebles a three film contract to celebrate the success of *Watermelon Man*, van Peebles eschewed the studio system with his next film, completely self-financing *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* other than a \$50,000 loan from Bill Cosby, which he later repaid rather than give away rights for the film.[57] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] Whereas van Peebles may have been able to turn the commercial film industry inside out, he was still working with a script and a studio that maintained a level of control. With independence, he was able to film in a radically different manner that followed Solanas and Getino's principles for a third cinema. Though he never directly references Solanas and Getino's manifesto, which was written just a few years earlier, I argue that the similarities of his practice to this manifesto stem from a politics that engage with the same global struggles, and by virtue of the films "category B" approach. What distinguishes *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* is that van Peebles sought to make a truly entertaining film rather than focus solely on consciousness raising. As he argued, The Man "ain't about to go carrying no messages for you, especially a relevant one, for free." [58] In other words, van Peebles intended entertainment to be the delivery mechanism of his politics, modifying Solanas and Getino's third cinema manifesto. As a result, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* hybridizes the signifying regime of third cinema films, rather than only the commercial industry itself.

While the Rodney King tape brought the unequal treatment of race to the national consciousness in 1991, largely because the violence against King was witnessed via citizen camcorder and not as a reenactment of violence, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* spoke directly to African American audiences by acknowledging police brutality as part of the black experience in the United States twenty years earlier. The acknowledgement of police brutality is shown in the beginning of the film as police officers expect Sweetback to stand idly by as they beat a black revolutionary named Moo Moo. One of the police officers even apologizes to Sweetback when he realizes Sweetback is cuffed to the other officer during the beating, "Hey Sweetback, I'm sorry man. I forgot you two were attached together." As Newton argues in his own analysis of this sequence,

"We [African Americans] are realizing more and more that it has always been a circus. They have tried to make a circus of our circumstances and our communities, but our awareness is growing." [59]

Images from *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*:



This example of police brutality against specific communities within the United States is a historical remainder of what Rana terms settler empire, which he argues has always been biopolitical in its subjugation of certain races. For example,

"Indians, blacks, or Mexicans who had long lived on the land were denied... basic rights. In essence, they existed as colonized populations within the territory of the United States." [60]

Such a fact informs van Peebles own understanding of African Americans in the United States being colonized.

The police officer apologizes to Sweetback, obfuscating the role race plays in the political violence taking place.



A silhouette of running legs, superimposed with Sweetback running, a stylization where van Peebles once again prints his stamp upon the image.



The chief of police attempting to locate Sweetback as he flees across the country – one of the police procedural sequences in the film.



Testimonials from individuals interviewed by the police are scattered throughout the film, each time the individuals say they haven't seen Sweetback.

The congruency between radical black politics of the 1960s and 1970s in their framing of American empire explains the way in which *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* enjoyed a brief burst of popularity, which gave way to political projects identified with American creedal narratives on one hand and the Blaxploitation genre on the other. Van Peebles's politics, in other words, require a different definition of U.S. politics and history than the prevailing notion, post-civil rights. As Rana argues, the historical distancing between "the 'good' 1960s of desegregation campaigns" and "the 'bad' 1960s of urban riots and left disintegration" resulted in

"the prevailing sentiment... that all reform projects must begin by reaffirming accounts of American civic promise. In a sense, not only has the colonial frame been dismissed, but—to the extent that there is any public awareness of such a frame—disassociating oneself from it is seen, even by leftliberals, as a precondition for being taken seriously in politics." [61]

Considering van Peebles's resistance to Raucher's original script for *Watermelon Man* and his response to *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, his political articulations in his films and reflections on his own filmmaking should be read as a direct challenge to this historical dismantling of radical political projects concerning disenfranchised populations in the United States.

I recounted previously a number of features that link *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* to third cinema manifestos, but the real importance of the film is the way in which the director mobilizes his auteur status in order to inject a category B, explicitly political film with an entertaining aesthetics. After the beating of Moo Moo, and Sweetback's political awakening through witnessing this manifestation of American Empire, the film follows Sweetback in one long chase as he evades police – or The Man – and successfully escapes to Mexico. By focusing on his exploits, the film operates as a hybrid action/ thriller on one level and police procedural on another, as detectives attempt to track Sweetback down. A soundtrack by the up-and-coming Earth, Wind and Fire accompanies Sweetback's pursuits as he runs through the streets, leaps from bridges, and rides on the top of semi-trucks. At one point, he wins over a biker gang that accosts him by having sex with the woman that leads the gang. At other points, he has scuffles with the police or otherwise evades them when they finally catch up. While Earth, Wind and Fire's soundtrack plays, sometimes mixed in with van Peebles's own vocalizing, the video track shows images of the city, sometimes with Sweetback running through it. These chase sequences often include experimental stylizations, such as split screen compositions or graphical superimpositions, such as the silhouette of a pair of legs running. In this way, these chase sequences appear as a precursor to what would become the popular music video aesthetic of the 1980s. The entertainment of these musical sequences, however, is coupled with the brutality and structural injustices of the police-procedural, with officers harassing the local black community while they look for Sweetback. The white mayor apologizes to two of the black officers for using racial slurs, and then proceeds to tell them that they can "be a real credit to [their] people" if they helped to catch Sweetback. At one point, a man who helped Sweetback is made deaf by a policeman's gunshot as they interrogate him. As a result, the aesthetic is both entertaining through its use of music and music video-like qualities, but also contains the urgency of Sweetback's escape from a brutal regime coupled with fury over the injustices of racial violence.

As Earth, Wind and Fire's jazzy compositions propel Sweetback across the country to Mexico, he moves through constituent disenfranchised groups, highlighting a number of these populations within the United States: African American communities, churches, orphanages, and entertainers, Mexican laborers, white laborers (happy to snub the police), hippy communes, queer compatriots, etc. As the police question these individuals, they provide their



The testimonials come from a range of individuals.



This testimonial invites queer communities onto the screen, extending the intersectionality of van Peebles argument for more diverse filmic representations.



Sweetback writhes in pain from a wound he suffered earlier, while the Chorus of Colored Bourgeois Angels begin to speak to him.

testimonial directly to the camera, providing answers such as “Sweetback? I haven’t seen him” or “No chil’ – I mean officer – I didn’t see Mr. Sweetback... If you see him, send him here! I’m a militant queen.” The direct address to the camera blurs the lines between fiction and documentary, and van Peebles himself is clear that these were not professional actors, creating a film style immanent to the communities in which the film is set. Given that each direct address is supposedly the point of view of a police officer, they begin to articulate a network that refuses the surveillance of Empire. In other words, setting these sequences against the backdrop of the chase both links these communities to Sweetback’s subjective criminality and subversion of American empire and it extends a politics of intersectionality across the film that broadens the conception of diversity beyond the United States’ settler ambitions.

The chase sequences place van Peebles’s idiosyncratic aesthetic on full display, now unhindered by French funding and crew or U.S. studio commercialism. He returns to the disjunctive use of sound seen in both *Story of a Three-Day Pass* and *Watermelon Man*, but extends it into long sequences, which highlights the music of Earth, Wind and Fire, unbroken by narrative expectations. I described these earlier as music video-like, because they could only be described as a music video if the sequences were beholden to a single song. Instead, the film operates like the jazzy, improvisational approach African American exhibition took towards the films of Micheaux and other African American silent cinema pioneers, where “live jazz and blues performances did not so much accompany film screenings as compete with them for audience attention and response.” This, Anna Siomopoulos argues “created a space for nondominant ideological positions to become visible.” [62] Van Peebles remixes his own tracks with the voices of the aforementioned disenfranchised groups in order to punctuate a chase that becomes politically charged in relation to the growing significance of Sweetback’s escape. He is not only savior of the black radical Moo Moo, but he escapes the colonial administration of the United States embodied by a white police force that is linked to both political control, through the mayor that oversees the chase, and to the press, which is manipulated into reporting Sweetback’s successful capture. In this case, Sweetback’s escape reveals a weakness in this colonial administration that all of the disenfranchised might exploit through radical revolution. Such a message, however, is at clear odds with American exceptionalism.

The most critical moment of the film in relation to critiques of American exceptionalism is Sweetback’s final emergence from fugitive to revolutionary, which takes place during a conversation with a chorus of angels. The discourse with angels takes place through the soundtrack, which shifts between “When the Morning Comes,” “Wade in the Water,” van Peebles’s own “Won’t Bleed Me,” and a call and response between the disembodied voice of Sweetback and a chorus of angels. These tracks are woven together complexly to articulate not only Sweetback’s transition from fugitive to revolutionary, with the hymnal music lending the sequence a religious quality, but also the transformation of the angels themselves, representing a metaphysical transformation of consciousness that both van Peebles and Newton argue is key to African American empowerment. In the script, this is reflected by the angels being titled “Chorus of Colored Bourgeois Angels” in the beginning of the sequence, but as Sweetback shows the angels how to resist, their chorus transforms and in the script they become “Colored Angels Finally Getting it Together and Acting Black.”

This short exchange illustrates the initial dynamic between angels and Sweetback:

- CHORUS OF COLORED BOURGEOIS ANGELS:  
they bled you Mama  
they bled your Papa
- SWEETBACK:  
but they won’t bleed me  
nigger scared and pretend they don’t see





After Sweetback patches himself up, he gets up and speaks back to the Bourgeois Angels, who in the script then become Colored Angels Finally Getting It Together and Acting Black when they cease their defeatist message.

- COLORED ANGELS:  
just like you Sweetback
- SWEETBACK:  
just like I used to be  
work your black behind to the gums  
and you supposed to Thomas til he done
- COLORED ANGELS:  
you got to Thomas Sweetback  
they bled your brother  
they bled your sister
- SWEETBACK:  
yeah but he won't bleed me

The call and response continues along these lines, with Sweetback continuing to make his case for resistance to racial oppression. Finally, a new consciousness emerges in the chorus of angels.

- COLORED ANGELS:  
they bled your brother  
they bled your sister
- SWEETBACK:  
your brother and your sister too. . .how come it took me so long to see. . .  
how he gets us to use each other...
- COLORED ANGELS:  
niggers scared
- SWEETBACK:  
we got to get it together. . .if he kick a brother it gotta be like he's kicking  
your mother
- COLORED ANGELS:  
he got your brother  
don't let him get you  
haul your black ass Sweetback  
he ain't gonna let you stand tall Sweetback  
the man knows everything Sweetback  
the man knows everything
- SWEETBACK:  
then he oughta know I'm tired of him fucking with me!!  
(SWEETBACK ON THE RUN – FIELDS)
- COLORED ANGELS FINALLY GETTING IT TOGETHER AND ACTING  
BLACK:  
run Sweetback  
run mother fucker  
they bled your sister
- SWEETBACK:  
they won't bleed me
- BLACK ANGELS:  
haul your black ass. . .  
run mother fucker[63]

In this transition from bourgeois to black, the collective voice takes a revolutionary stance. While the film returns to the concerns of *Story of a Three Day Pass* with commentary on 'Thomasing' and its split psycho-political positions, unlike van Peebles's earlier film, here we see a wholesale transformation of consciousness. As Newton argued, consciousness raising was the most important quality of the film, because "we must understand [African American] unity and also how we must heighten our consciousness." [64]

The unity in black consciousness provides evidence of van Peebles's success in his industrial and political experiment, where he eschewed established industry even when invited into it, in order to wed an explicitly political aesthetic/third cinema with an entertaining film that would carry his message. In this film, van Peebles's mantra "entertainment-wise, a motherfucker" manifests itself most clearly, which has both industrial and political significance. The film received divergent responses, some decried the film for its depiction of hypermasculinity, but black cinemagoers also left the theater discussing new possibilities for the roles African Americans could take.[65] The excitement it generated suggests that van Peebles successfully married a politics of decolonization with an entertaining film, a film that seemingly operates as an example of third cinema, injected with a drive towards commercial entertainment with its action, generic features, and musical remix. I work through van Peebles's first three films here to show the process in which he develops his mantra regarding entertainment and industry, but also to reflect on the fact that such qualities existed across the three films. If "entertainment-wise, a motherfucker" summarizes van Peebles's approach, whereby he approaches industries and tweaks them to inject critique, all of his films should be read with this approach in mind. The significance is not only aesthetic or industrial, it also comments directly on ideological histories, particularly American creedal narratives when privileged by the industry at large.

## Cinematic civil rights and critical race politics, past and present

Van Peebles's first three features hybridize cinematic models to make them signify in unusual and politicized ways. Rather than just taking this approach to the cinematic medium, however, van Peebles similarly approaches the mainstream political environment of the 1960s and 1970s. In doing so, van Peebles participates in a transnational logic of 1968 by linking the civil rights struggles in the United States to anti-colonial struggles abroad. This argument is significant because of the creedal narrative that the United States is free and equal from its founding has made it difficult to understand the nation's colonial underpinnings. Van Peebles reveals the contradictions of this creedal narrative in different industries (art cinema, studio films, and independent films) and in different cultural contexts within the United States (the military, liberal suburbia, urban communities), and opens what has become a mainstream narrative about the civil rights into more radical traditions that frame the United States as a settler empire.

Despite his moving between a variety of industries or modes of production, van Peebles's voice is remarkably distinct and consistent. The jarring notes and sudden cuts in *Story of a Three-Day Pass* anticipate the interjection of intertitles in *Watermelon Man*, and as a result the entrance of the angels who speak directly to Sweetback and the viewer in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* comes as no surprise. One might chalk this up to van Peebles's determination to retain creative control, but by speaking to race relations in the United States at this pivotal moment, he does not just speak for himself, as evidenced by the Panthers' support. Though he tells the individual stories of his characters, as Deleuze and Guattari argue of minor literature, the "cramped space" of such stories

"forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it." [66]

The cramped space can only be a result of the pressure placed on creative industries to conform to creedal narratives, championed then and now, and as a result this 'whole other story' is precisely that which clashes with the ideology of American exceptionalism.

Even so, attempts have been made to obfuscate the relevance of van Peebles's filmography, such as the common framing of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* as part of the genesis of the commercial Blaxploitation movement, rather than a contribution to radical politics during the civil rights.[67] While *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* no doubt contributed to the genesis of this movement, it should be understood of part of van Peebles' larger navigation of different industries, which in turn lends significance to understanding the political potential of Blaxploitation itself and its own integration of commercial interests. In understanding cinematic approaches of the present, it is important to remember how such an important filmography has been reframed or ignored.

To this end, I began this article with a reading of popular films in 2016 that mobilize affect to affirm creedal narratives against the backdrop of Black Lives Matter. I suggest that they continue the larger project of creedal affirmation more blatantly seen in histories of the civil rights. Like van Peebles, and Black Lives Matter more broadly, directors today again raise this question of American exceptionalism. Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2016) reveals potential evils of white liberalism via the generic conventions of a horror film. Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight* (2016) focuses on African American communities without the need to reintegrate its story into an American creedal narrative. Instead, *Moonlight* tells the queer, coming of age story of Chiron (Alex Hibbert, Ashton Sanders, and Trevante Rhodes) set amidst almost entirely African American communities. More recently, *Sorry to Bother You* (2018) mobilizes comedy and surrealism to comment on structural racial inequality. While these films received critical acclaim, such approaches stand apart from the previously mentioned popular films from 2016 by telling stories without the need to atone for American Empire. *Moonlight* in particular has a focus on the lingering effects of America's settler ambitions through the depiction of poverty, racial segregation, drug use, and racially motivated jailing practices. *Moonlight* thus takes part in Black Lives Matters, illustrating the important contribution of cinema to contemporary political networks of protest, and it resonates with van Peebles's politics, by telling a story emphasizing the consequences of a colonial past carried out unto the present. The conversation between two political modes resurfaces today, and like in the 1960s, industry gravitates towards "Hollywood feel-good conventions," but critical voices are present and listening. The question is whether history will quickly forget Peele, Jenkins, and Boots Riley's interventions, or if *Get Out*, *Moonlight*, and *Sorry to Bother You* will foster another approach to cinema that excavates a more critical history.

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### Notes

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5. Bates, Courtney E.J., "Sweetback's 'Signifyin(g)' Song: Mythmaking in Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 24 (2007), 172. The mainstream in this citation refers to "white action and Western film narratives."
6. Deleuze, *Towards a Minor*, 17.
7. Young, Cynthia, *Soul Power: Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 6.
8. Dargis, Manohla and A.O. Scott, "Watching While White: How Movies Tackled Race in 2016," *The New York Times*, January 5, 2017.
9. Rana, Aziz, "Colonialism and Constitutional Memory," *U.C. Irvine Law Review*, Vol. 5, Iss. 2 (2015), 268.
10. Creedal politics here refers to an insistence on the framing of the United States as free and equal from its founding, in line with its constitution, which obfuscates contemporary structural inequalities.
11. Young, *Soul Power*, 3.
12. For example: *Killer of Sheep* (1977), *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), *Paris is Burning* (1990). All significant films representing marginal communities in the United States, though perhaps not with such an aggressive politics as *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*.
13. Van Peebles, *The Making*, 12.
14. Van Peebles, Melvin, "Lights, Camera, and the Black Role in Movies," *Ebony*, November (2005), 96.
15. Van Peebles, *The Making*, 15.
16. Through Sidney Poitier's oeuvre, for example.

17. Aziz, Rana, *The Two Face of American Freedom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 13.
18. This framing was part of the larger discourse surrounding black power. Rana, "Colonialism and Constitutional Memory," 282.
19. Lipset, Seymour Martin, *The First New Nation* (New York: Basic Books, Inc. 1963), 2.
20. Lipset, *The First New*, 15.
21. Rana, Aziz, "Race and the American Creed: Recovering Black Radicalism," *N+1 Magazine*, issue 24 (2016): <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-24/politics/race-and-the-american-creed/>
22. Newton provided his own revolutionary analysis of the film: "He Won't Bleed Me: A Revolutionary Analysis of Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song" in *To Die for the People: The Writings of Huey P. Newton* (New York: Random House 1972), 112-147.
23. Donalson, Melvin, *Black Directors in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press 2003), 3. [\[return to page 2\]](#)
24. Van Peebles, "Lights, Camera," 94.
25. Van Peebles, "Lights, Camera," 92.
26. Getino, Fernando and Octavio Getino, "Towards a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiences for the Development of a Cinema of Liberation in the Third World," in *New Latin American Cinema*, ed. Michael T. Martin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1997), 42-43.
27. Getino, "Towards a Third," 42.
28. Getino, "Towards a Third," 54.
29. Getino, "Towards a Third," 42 – thought perhaps least so in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, with its taciturn protagonist, but this is also the film most closely aligned with third cinema. Nonetheless, the film provides Sweetback's history as a way of explaining his subject-position, and details the process of his becoming-political.
30. Gabara, Rachel, "Abderrahmane Sissako: Second and Third Cinema in the First Person," in *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories*, eds. Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010), 321.
31. Holtmeier, Matthew, *Contemporary Political Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2019), 80.
32. Comolli, Jean-Luc and Paul Narboni, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism," in *Cahiers du Cinéma: Volume 3, 1969-1972 The Politics of Representation*, ed. Nick Browne (London: Routledge 1996 [1990]), 58-67.
33. Comolli, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism," 60.
34. Comolli, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism," 62.
35. Comolli, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism," 62-63.
36. Comolli, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism," 62.
37. Gerhardt, Christina and Sara Saljoughi, *1968 and Global Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 2018), 2, 7.

38. Graham, Peter, "New Directions in French Cinema," in *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, ed. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 576. [[return to page 3](#)]

39. *Un Ours pour le F.B.I.* (1964), *Un Américain en enfer* (1965), *Le Chinois du XIV* (1966), *La Fête à Harlem* (1967), and *La Permission* (1967).

40. Johnson brought an international component to the San Francisco Film Festival, would later go on to help establish the Oakland Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame (which inducted van Peebles), and later would teach African American and Third World film at Berkeley, a locus of many of the issues discussed in this article. For a brief list of his many accolades, see: "Remembering Albert Johnson: Black Scholar, Critic, and Academician" by John Williams in *The Black Scholar*, Spring 2003, 33.

41. My colloquialism here refers to the establishment of van Peebles legend through his own autobiographical account in *The Making of Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, as well as his son Mario van Peebles' later retelling in the film *Baadasssss!* (2003). He recounts other aspects of this story in many interviews, which add to the legend as well.

42. Van Peebles, *The Making*, 68.

43. Wayne, Mike, *Political Film: The Dialectics of Third Cinema*, (London: Pluto Press, 2001), 23.

44. Van Peebles, *The Making*, 14.

45. Van Peebles, *The Making*, 12.

46. "Towards a Third Cinema" by Solanas and Getino, "For an Imperfect Cinema" by Espinosa, and "An Aesthetic of Hunger" by Rocha.

47. Rana, "Colonialism and Constitutional Memory," 284. Further citation in Heath, Louis G., *Off the Pigs! The History and Literature of the Black Panther Party* (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, Inc. 1976), 249.

48. Van Peebles, *The Making*, 12.

49. Fanon, Frantz, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008 [1958]), 257-258.

50. Van Peebles is referred to as "Head Nitwit in Charge" in part of the musical credits.

51. Gates, Racquel, "Subverting Hollywood from the Inside Out: Melvin van Peebles's *Watermelon Man*," *Film Quarterly*, vol. 68, No. 1 (2014), 13. [[return to page 4](#)]

52. Van Peebles, *The Making*, 45.

53. Gates, "Subverting Hollywood," 9.

54. Gates, "Subverting Hollywood," 12. Bracketed numbers are my addition.

55. Gates, "Subverting Hollywood," 20.

56. Peebles comments on the use of his song in *Thirteen*, a New York based public media company: <http://www.thirteen.org/metrofocus/2012/02/melvin-van-peebles-love-thats-occupy-wall-street/>

57. Rausch, Andrew, *Reflections on Blaxploitation: Actors and Directors Speak* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2009), 150. [[return to page 5](#)]



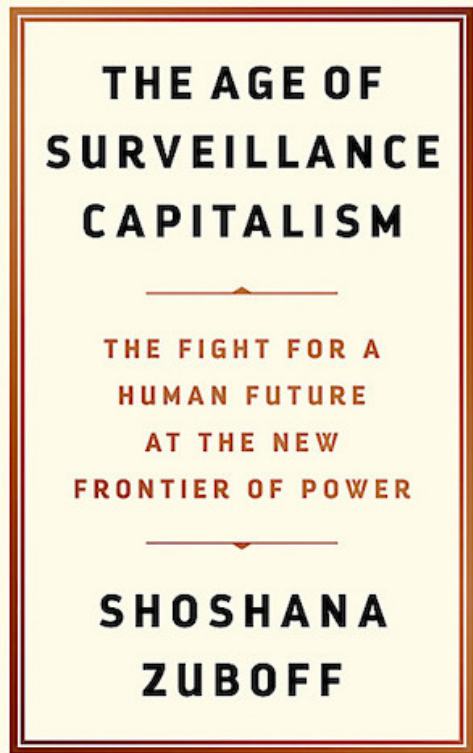
58. Van Peebles, *The Making*, 14-15.
59. Newton, Huey P., "He Won't Bleed Me: A Revolutionary Analysis of Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song," in *To Die for the People: The Writings of Huey P. Newton* (New York: Random House, 1972), 120.
60. Rana, *The Two Faces*, 13.
61. Rana, "Colonialism and Constitutional Memory," 287.
62. Siomopoulos, Anna, "The Birth of Black Cinema: Race, Reception, and Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates*," *Moving Image* Vol 4, No 2 (2006), 112; 117.
63. Van Peebles, *The Making*, 171; 173; 180-181.
64. Newton, "He Won't Bleed Me," 146
65. See Lerone Bennett Jr's reponse: "The Emancipation Orgasm: Sweetback in Wonderland," *Ebony*, Vol 26, No. 1 (1971), 107.
66. Deleuze, *Towards a Minor*, 17.
67. See the interview in *Reflections on Blaxploitation*, cited previously. Peebles has little to say about Blaxploitation itself: Rausch, Andrew. *Reflections on Blaxploitation: Actors and Directors Speak*, (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press 2009).

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## Surveillance capitalism and its racial discontents

review by [Gary Kafer](#)

Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight For a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York: Public Affairs, 2019. 704 pages.

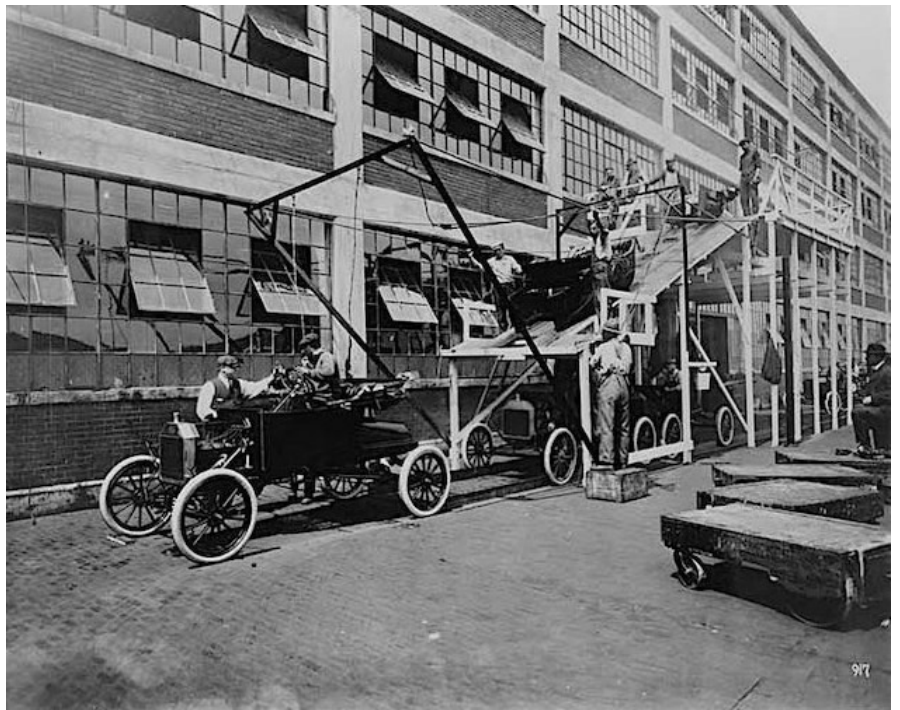
In *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Shoshana Zuboff charges head first into the financial, legal, and technological developments that have enabled Google and fellow Big Data behemoths to secure jurisdiction over the procurement and use of personal information. As she contends, it is precisely upon asymmetries of access that surveillance capitalists are capable of accruing power. Surveillance capitalists, she writes,

“know everything *about us*, whereas their operations are designed to be unknowable *to us*. They accumulate vast domains for new knowledge *from us*, but not *for us*. They predict our futures for the sake of others’ gain, not ours” (11).

Surveillance capitalism weaves a society that functions not upon the division of labor, but the “division of learning – the axial principle of social order in an information civilization” (180). Under this regime, power contracts in those who possess the authority to acquire knowledge and act upon it, as well as exercise the right to distribute and withhold knowledge accordingly. Imbalanced power relations are a consequence of surveillance capitalism’s capacity to orient bodies and things towards the total control of information, thus separating “the tuners from the tuned” (519). Epistemology is the new terrain of social inequality.

However, what seems in Zuboff’s project a striking and plausible thesis must be held under closer scrutiny. That is, who precisely is the *us* rendered knowable in surveillance capitalism? Does an emphasis on behavioral extraction shift focus away from structural disparities of wealth accumulation towards the consumer as a self-determined individual? Relatedly, how might we account for processes of racialization historically foundational to the dispossessions of capitalist exploitation within this new regime?

Certainly, these questions are not new to critiques of capitalism and its mutations. However, in her emphasis on the behavioral modification of the consumer, Zuboff loses sight of the broader means by which surveillance is made possible across sites of production, labor, management, distribution, and consumption. Rather than do as she does in positioning behavioral modification as a totalizing force within the instrumentarian regime of control, in what follows, I hold in sight how the impacts of surveillance capitalism are never equally experienced across the social body. This has great significance for imagining futures of collective resistance that don’t take personal autonomy as the guarantor of democratic reform.



Black and white photograph from 1913 of factory workers within the final assembly line at Ford Motor Company.

Surveillance capitalism, Zuboff announces, was invented. It was not an inevitability of technological developments nor a necessary outcome of information capitalism. Rather, it “was intentionally constructed at a moment in history, in much the same way that the engineers and tinkerers at the Ford Motor Company invented mass production in the Detroit of 1913” (85). Google is centered at the crosshairs of Zuboff’s critique. Tracing the company’s technological developments and public-facing rhetoric from the early 2000s onward, Zuboff argues that surveillance capitalism was enabled by three key historical conditions that marked the passage from the twentieth to the twenty-first century:

- the transformation from mass collectivity to the self-determined individual under the sign of second-modernity;
- the development of individualism under neoliberalist ideology to accelerate the accumulation of profit in the market economy;
- the post-9/11 state of exception which enabled Google to defend the expansion and commercialization of surveillance technologies as public benefit.



Proposed plan for Google's new campus in Mountain View, California.



Zuboff reveals how our contemporary economic order has seen a shift in wealth accumulation from the means of production in a classical Marxist sense to the corporatized ownership of behavioral modification. What makes capitalism surveillant here is the way in which big data companies have achieved the “privatization of the central principle of social ordering” (512-513) through the incessant monitoring of consumers, the extraction of their intimate realities, and the transformation of surplus information into revenue. Whereas industrial capitalism required high scales of production with low unit cost, Google moves full throttle on its logics of accumulation, demanding the extraction of greater amounts of behavioral data to satisfy the proliferation of market derivatives. Users are not laborers in the sense of Fordist factory production, but rather “the sources of raw-material supply” (69-70) that circulate the predictive marketplace.

What is at stake in claiming that surveillance capitalism was invented in the twenty-first century? At the risk of sounding glib, taken separately, surveillance and capitalism were not recent inventions developed on Google’s campus. Why then, in their devastating marriage, do these two terms constitute a wholesale break from previous iterations of capitalist exploitation? In claiming the novelty of capitalism’s acquisition of surveillance for profitable ends, Zuboff evades a range of other rich theoretical debates that have traced this much longer history of extractive capitalism, surveillance, behavioral modification, and social engineering. These include:

- the development of cybernetic theories in the post-war moment, which consider how feedback processes were increasingly deployed to predict and control events within distributed and interactive networks; [1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]
- Foucauldian discourses of biopower that consider the administration of life on the population scale through racialized regulatory measures that demarcate those capable of (re)producing value in the nation-state and those otherwise targeted for segregation, incarceration, and premature death; [2]
- autonomous Marxists theorists who examine how post-industrial conditions have fostered new forms of production and consumption that operate through the commodification of affect and cognition within the field of the social.[3]

While these discourses might seem outside the realm of economic analysis proper to Zuboff’s framework, these omissions are in fact strategic, allowing the author to sideline a much longer genealogy of capitalism’s surveillant practices in order to distinguish between a “good” and “bad” capitalism. Indeed, Zuboff maintains that capitalism is not inherently problematic, but is only made so through its amendment by surveillance. This is a fallacy, and serves only to normalize capitalism as a driver of modern civilization at the continued expense of those who are continually subject to its exploitative circuits of discipline and control.

What might it mean to consider surveillance capitalism as simply another iteration of capitalism writ large? In another register, how might we position race as central to the means by which capitalist value is procured through the production and subjugation of marginal populations? In his classic 1983 book *Black Marxism*, Cedric Robinson makes evident the lingering processes of race that have gripped the slow emergence of a capitalist economic system in Western culture since the feudal era. Robinson challenges the Marxist thesis that capitalism marked a rupture from older economic orders, rather evolving from processes of racialism that characterized the dawning of modern European society: slavery, imperialism, genocide, and colonialism. His term *racial capitalism* signposts the way that capitalism’s goal was never to homogenize, but rather differentiate through “eras of violent domination and social extraction.”[4] Note how extraction in Robinson’s framework is not a technique belonging only to the modern capitalist era, but rather it is a foundational strategy by which value is accumulated from the fracturing of the social body into labor populations.

Preceding Detroit of 1913 we find a bleak history in which race enabled the formation of modern capitalism's most basic tenets. Saidiya Hartman notes as such:

“Racism was central to the expansion of capitalist relations of production, the organization, division, and management of the laboring classes, and the regulation of the population through licensed forms of sexual association and conjugal unions and through the creation of an internal danger to the purity of the body public.”[5]

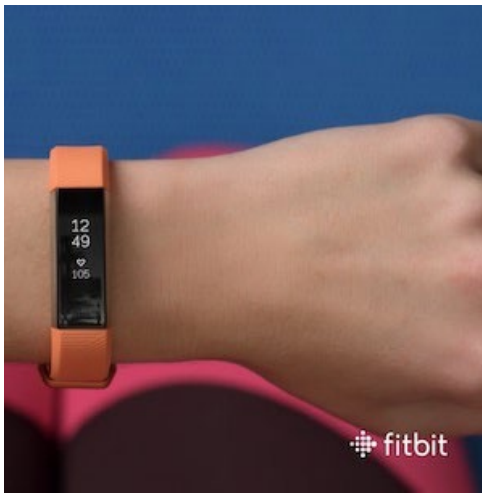
Property relations, modes of production, exchange value, and debt structures all sedimented as apparently natural conditions of Western culture through the crucible of racial difference.

The centrality of race to modern capitalism is perhaps most evident in the archives of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Ian Baucom traces the history of global capital accumulation through the accomplishments of the slave economy in brandishing, quantifying, and ordering black populations under a burgeoning credit system. His key site of analysis is the 1781 Zong atrocity, wherein enslaved Africans were thrown overboard so that merchants could collect insurance for lost property. The value extracted from this massacre was speculative. That is to say, the credit that slavers understood to be gained in their actions operated through the “existence of imaginary values” that did not follow exchange but preceded it. [6] As commodities of trade, black people were sites for the extraction of future value that would authorize present action.[7]



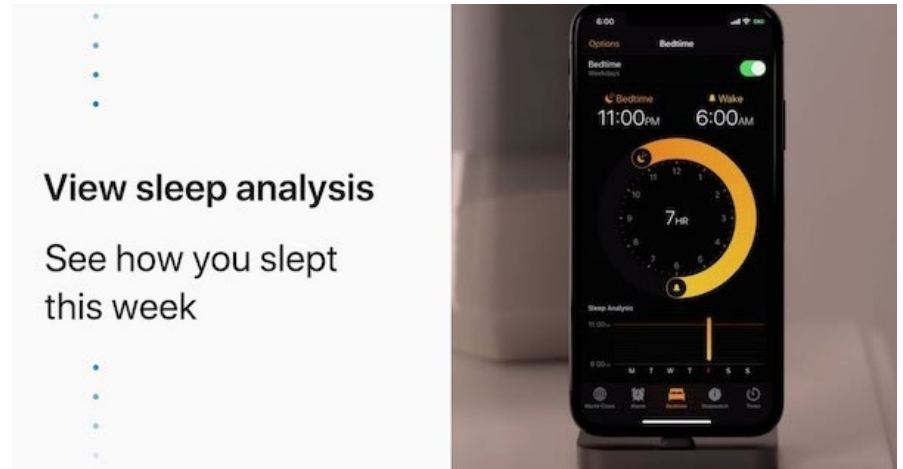
J. M. W. Turner, *Slavers Throwing overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon coming on* (1840), oil on canvas, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Turner's painting was inspired by the Zong massacre of 1781.

If chattel slavery and its racial scaffolding are not a hangover from premodern times, but rather coterminous with modern capitalism, then what bearing does this have on surveillance capitalism properly construed? Consider here one of the key terms that coheres Zuboff's project: *rendition*. Defined as “the concrete operational practice through which [...] human experience is claimed as raw material for datafication and all that follows” (233-234), rendition allows surveillance capitalists to close the gap between experience and knowledge. Equipped with fitness trackers, iPhones, and smart technologies, the body within the principle of rendition is “reimagined as a behaving object to be tracked and



A commercial demonstrating Fitbit's ability to track heart rate.

calculated for indexing and search” (242). Reaping behavioral surplus is simply a matter of careful biometric analysis.



Google's Bedtime application, which allows for users to track sleep behavior over long periods of time.

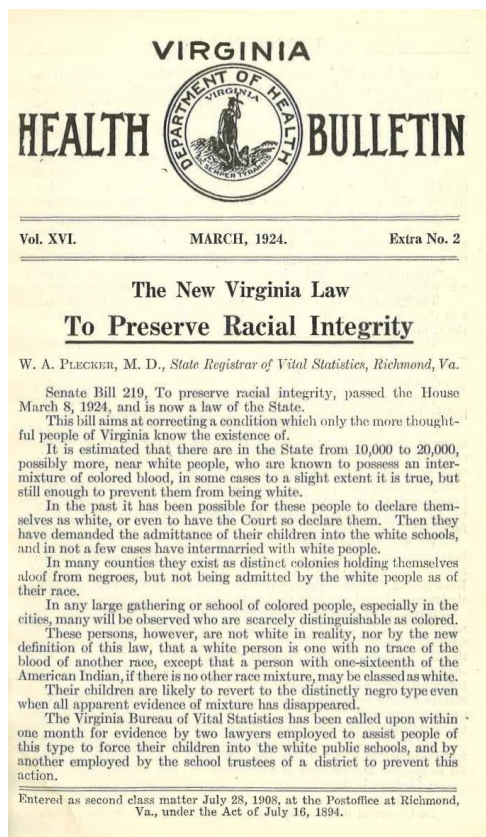


Google's self-driving car project was announced in 2010 and has since been tested to ensure safety standards, map driving routes, and develop analytics for traffic.

There's a certain universalism to Zuboff's understanding of rendition and its ability to lay claim to the totality of human experience written on every body that traverses ubiquitous computing environments. According to Zuboff, surveillance capitalism exercises a new species of power known as instrumentarianism—a high-tech perversion of B. F. Skinner's operant conditioning—wherein behavior is modified for prediction, monetization, and control. At imperceptible timescales, our moods, thoughts, and somatic states are scoured for data, which in turn are transformed into revenue by markets that aim to predict and shape our future actions. Behaviors are maneuvered for maximum profit. Such is the work of our new technologies from Silicon Valley companies like self-driving cars, which aim to conceal their latent instrumentarian ideology with promises of connectivity, knowledge, and security. As a universal condition of surveillance capitalism, rendition is intimately pervasive, contouring the psychological and corporeal boundaries of our everyday encounters. As such, Zuboff warns us that “we cannot fully reckon with the gravity of surveillance capitalism and its consequences unless we can trace the scars they carve into the flesh of our daily lives” (22). Readers familiar with critical race studies might give pause here, noting the uncanny reference to flesh that seems to authorize Zuboff's ability to maneuver the extraction of behavioral data as a universal concern. For her, the datafied body serves as the common horizon of human experience under surveillance capitalism.

Yet, as the history of capitalism's racial exploitation has shown, flesh, while a conceptual precursor to the body, is not simply a biological trait; flesh is *made*. As Hortense Spillers famously asserts, the making of flesh is the means by which capitalist power asserts dominance over racialized bodies, reaping value from physical, psychic, and affective labor while denying such bodies access to the domain of humanity.[8] In order for the captive to be rendered amenable for physical, mental, and sexual labor, the body must first be turned into flesh through an intricate apparatus involving corporeal injury and legal subjugation. [9] The scars of behavioral extraction identified by Zuboff find their antecedent in Spillers' “hieroglyphics of the flesh,” a term which flags the symbolic transfer of physical violence on the captive body to the truth-value assigned to biological peculiarities facilitating differentiation between human populations.[10] If Google has the capacity to scar the body through behavioral extraction, then this proposition only makes sense within a racially inflected discourse that locates the biological as a site for the accumulation of capital.





The New Virginia Law to Preserve Racial Integrity of 1924, which defined “white persons” as those with ‘no trace of the blood of another race, except that a person with one-sixteenth of the American Indian, if there is no other race mixture.’ [Click here to see larger size and read it.](#)

In Zuboff’s estimation, no one is impervious to the logic of rendition. Indeed, instrumentarianism in her schema is different from totalitarianism insofar as it is not imposed by hierarchical power structures, but rather is located within the material reality of our Internet of Things. We might say that instrumentarianism is immanent insofar as it “thrives within bodies, transforming volition into reinforcement and action into conditioned response” (379). Google has infiltrated the intimate domains of our bodies and minds. No somatic expression is off limits. “There are many new territories of body rendition,” Zuboff exclaims: “organs, blood, eyes, brain waves, faces, gait, posture” (251). But precisely how new are these territories? Colonial optics, Paul Gilroy reminds us, have long forced “the mute body [to] disclose the truth of its racial identities.”<sup>[11]</sup> Blood has long been used to surveil, quantify, and subjugate black and indigenous populations through the one drop rule and blood quanta laws, respectively. Eugenics and criminology both borrowed from anthropometric systems for analyzing faces, fingerprints, eye color, and more to classify variations in the human race and purported behavioral deviance. Zuboff’s emphasis on the novelty of rendition’s scope not only obscures the history of capitalism’s exploitation of biological substance, but ignores the ways in which contemporary biometric systems continue to reify the specter of race through genomics, neuroimaging, iris scanning, and facial recognition software.<sup>[12]</sup>

As Zuboff overlooks this much longer history to rendition, she nonetheless continuously flirts with histories of settler colonialism as analogy for strategies of what she terms “digital dispossession” (99). A “political and material process” (158), digital dispossession denotes the subjugation of personal property—one’s experience—for circulation within surveillance capitalism’s market economy as prized behavioral data. Zuboff’s case study here is the development of Google Street View and its ethical and legal quandaries. She notes in particular the way in which dispossession becomes normalized by modes of habituation and adaptation wherein the public slowly acclimates to new technologies and their territorial incursions as the given state of things. On these grounds, Zuboff maintains throughout her book a comparison between digital dispossession and colonial exploitation. Achieving conquest through declarations of seizure and the arrogation of privacy as moral righteousness, surveillance capitalists imagine the inevitability of ubiquitous computing through the lens of manifest destiny. In Zuboff’s terms, just as the Spaniards legitimated their invasion of indigenous people in the Americas through appeals to the authority of God and the crown,

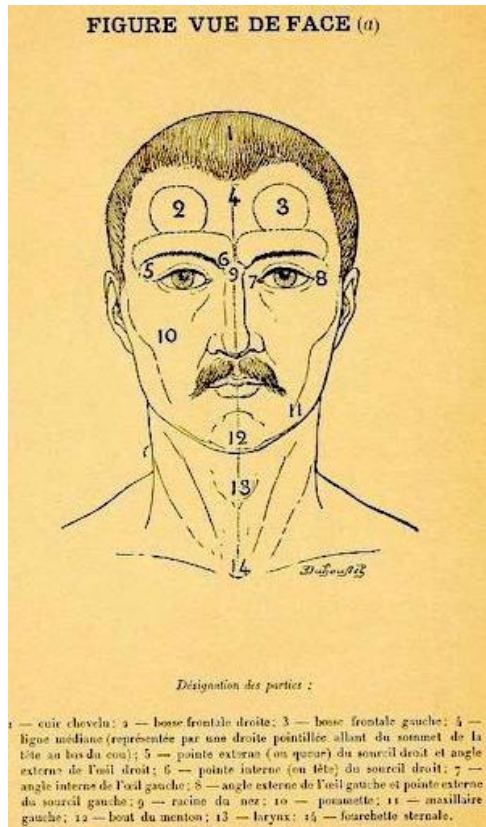
“these twenty-first century invaders do not ask permission; they forge ahead, papering the scorched earth with faux-legitimate practices. Instead of cynically conveyed monarchical edicts, they offer cynically conveyed terms-of-service agreements whose stipulations are just as obscured and incomprehensible” (180).

She thus concludes: “we are the native peoples now whose tacit claims to self-determination have vanished from the maps of our own experience” (100).

Analogy has a politics, and we must give serious attention to what such comparisons achieve. Chandan Reddy is prescient here, reminding us that while analogies may gain their affective force from the resemblance they proffer between seemingly dissimilar subjects,

“they also regulate what we understand as the essential matter and meaning between those subjects by their reduction to the ‘principle’ supposedly shared between them.”<sup>[123]</sup>

FIGURE VUE DE FACE (a)



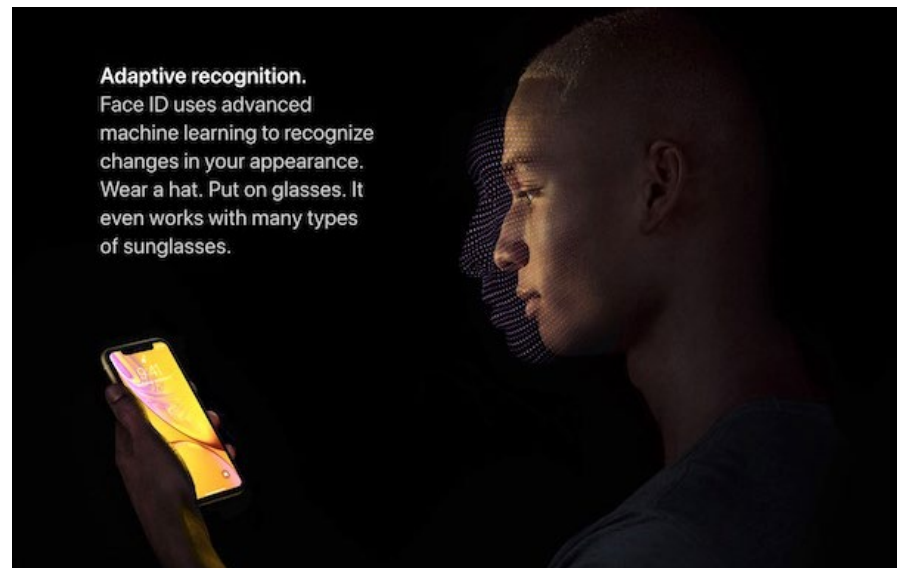
An illustration from Alphonse Bertillon's *Identification Anthropométrique* (1893) identifying the prominent landmarks of the face. Bertillon was a French police officer and biometrics researcher who created a bodily classification system to identify criminal behavior. [Click here to see larger size and read it.](#)

Analogies muddle and disguise heterogeneity, offering the illusion of commonality in place of incommensurability. They draw simple equivalences rather than doing the hard work of mapping the interconnectedness of disparate forms of social, historical, and political experience.

While Zuboff chastises surveillance capitalism for its “radical indifference” to the meaning of human experience—which in turn enables Google and other companies to champion “equivalence without equality” (377)—one wonders if her own analogy falls into the same rhetorical trap. That is, at whose expense is this comparison operating, one that likens “we” as a collective human population under surveillance capitalism to the Tainos who were expropriated, pillaged, and murdered by the Spaniards invaders? We might consider how Zuboff’s analogy is successful only insofar as its logical power draws from what Jodi A. Byrd names the “governance of the prior.” The prior, a symbolic space typically named as the Indigenous, offers “key transitive properties that enable forms of relationality within the intimacies and violences of empire.”[14] In other words, indigeneity, and its forced disappearance, is what sanctions settlers to claim self-determination, sovereignty, and shared national affiliation. Indeed, as scholars have noted, capitalism developed within settler colonial ideologies as a way to institutionalize violence against indigenous peoples in order to justify their genocide.[15] The staking of a collective political and economic body as sovereign or self-determined is only made possible through the erasure of the violences and inequalities necessary for its maintenance.

Only by excluding capitalism’s emergence through Euro-American colonialist expansion can Zuboff claim that the real violence of surveillance capitalism is its power to “disregard social norms and nullify the elemental rights associated with individual autonomy that are essential to the very possibility of a democratic society” (11). Zuboff uncritically assumes here that there is a democratic social order—a collective “we”—that pre-exists and is threatened by the invention of surveillance capitalism. However, this is only ever a “we” that already assumes full incorporation within the democratic national body, a “we” whose inalienable rights precede the rendition principle advanced under surveillance capitalism, a “we” that excludes those whose future has long been foreclosed by state violence, corporate control, and the penal system. In its final analysis, Zuboff’s analogy with indigenous exploitation obfuscates the ways in which social inequalities are

inimical to capitalist logics of accumulation, instead maintaining the universal as the privileged field of relation.



Apple has introduced Face ID into iPhone devices, which allows consumers to use facial scans to unlock devices and log in to accounts.

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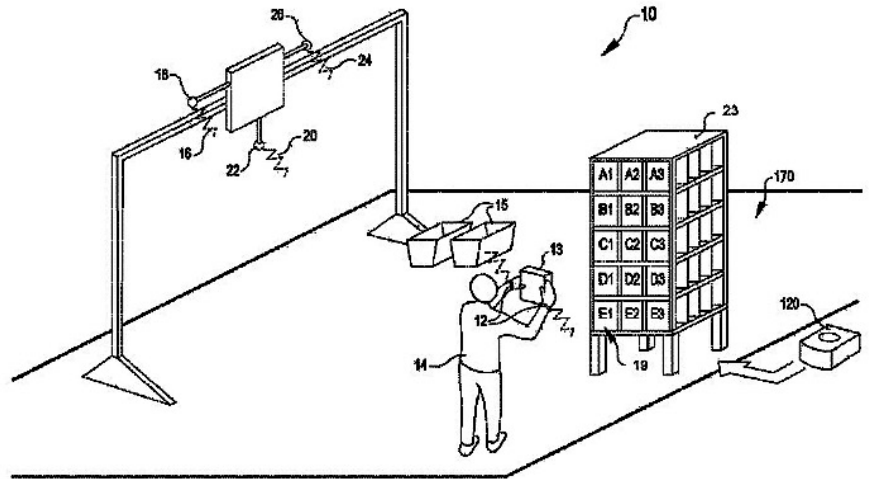


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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



A diagram from a 2018 patent filed by Amazon that showcases how wearable trackers help coordinate the movement of warehouse laborers.

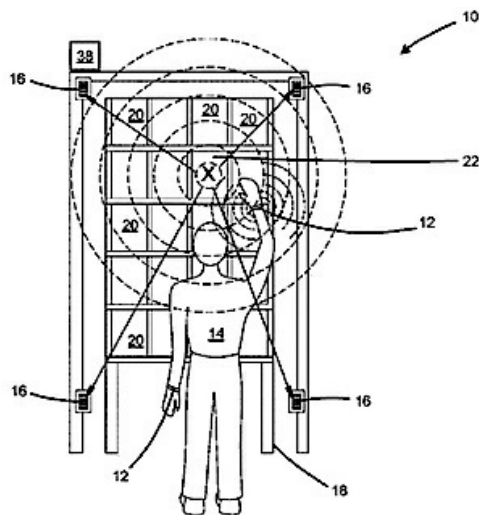
The universalism of behavioral extraction is a consequence of Zuboff's understanding of the surveillance capitalist marketplace, which targets the consumer as the source of raw-material for predictive analytics. Such emphasis comes at the expense of considering how social inequalities permeate broader infrastructures of Big Data and tech development.[16] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] Evgeny Morozov observes as such in his review of Zuboff's book:

“The concept of surveillance capitalism shifts the locus of the inquiry, and the struggles it informs, from the justice of relations of production and distribution inside the digitized social factory to the ethics of exchange between companies and their users. To make the behavioral surplus of *users*—the emancipated consumers that people Zuboff's earlier work—so crucial to the theory is to conclude that the extraction of surplus from all the other parts doesn't matter, or perhaps even doesn't exist.”[17]

In 2016, Amazon filed two patents for a wristband that can track the movement of warehouse laborers in real-time to assess performance levels.[18] Would we have to consider these workers as consumers for the purposes of surveillance capitalism, or would they simply fall outside its purview? What about the use of consumer data, satellite imagery, and predictive analytics by companies like Walmart to determine which locales can accommodate new distribution centers and stores, and which are not worth the risk?[19] I point out these sites of social, infrastructural, and economic exchange in order to invite a mode of inquiry that doesn't take as its central position the self-determined consumer and the “we” dispossessed by surveillance capitalism. Doing so can only ever consider social inequities as the result of behavior modulation for the profit of Big Data companies.

Zuboff's treatment of car insurance is instructive here. In her assessment, behavioral modulation is key to the distribution and profiteering ventures of insurance companies. The use of behavioral data extraction is twofold:

- first, this data “returns to the drivers, executing procedures to interrupt and



A diagram from a 2018 patent filed by Amazon that details how wrist tracking devices can sense workers movement in order to optimize efficiency.

shape behavior in order to enhance the certainty, and therefore the profitability, of predictions”;

- second, prediction analytics “rank and sort driver behavior flow into newly convened behavioral future markets in which third parties lay bets on what drivers will do now, soon, and later” (218).

In both cases, the dispossession of data from the driver is instrumentalized to shape future behavior for certain financial ends. However, this assumes that car insurance companies are gathering *only* behavioral data in order to assess their bottom-line, which reinforces the misconception that insurance analytics do not take into consideration race, class, gender, and ability for determining coverage benefits. Zuboff neglects to consider here how insurance companies not only use historical data sets in order to create a baseline average by which to assess deviances in behavioral data, but also how proxies like zip code, income, and medical history often correlate with membership in a protected class. Someone with an impeccable driving history may nonetheless be targeted by insurance companies with specific behavior modifying techniques merely because she is identified within a particular racial or ethnic category due to correlations in proxy information. If car insurance companies aim to make money, they do so not only through modulating behavior, but also through the production and maintenance of datasets that already encode social inequalities.

For another example, take Zuboff’s brief foray into predictive policing. Citing the collaboration between the software company Palantir and the New Orleans Police Department, Zuboff understands predictive policing through the lens of instrumentarian power insofar as this software is typically defended as the definitive solution to “societal uncertainty, demanding the certainty machines that promise direct, reliable means of detection, prediction, and even the automatic actuation of countermeasures” (385). In Zuboff’s view, the problem of predictive policing is its totalizing view of social relations. Palantir not only “identified gang members” (388), but also generated a network of relations through those gang members that could mine criminal history and social media for potential perpetrators or victims.

The great error of Zuboff’s treatment of predictive policing is her assumption that criminality is a stable behavioral expression that be located and modulated by predictive policing software. Predictive policing and gang databases are incontrovertibly grounded in histories of black subjugation that produce criminality as an essential racial category for the workings of the state-market. [20] As Angela Davis makes evident, the carceral state in the post-slavery era was founded upon efforts to control black labor with the convict lease system and Black Codes, which outlawed a range of actions, like vagrancy, absence from work, and obscene gestures only when the offending person was black.[21] This structure of racial exploitation has only rematerialized in the corporatization of punishment that we are now witnessing in the prison industrial complex, of which Palantir is but one entity. Throughout, criminal behavior is not simply identified for punishment, but rather it is *created* in order to continue extracting capital from racialized populations posited as an excess labor force—not to mention the more widespread effects that the carceral state has upon schooling, jobs, and family life in black and brown communities that also generate profit for pharmaceutical companies, military manufacturers, and security tech industries.

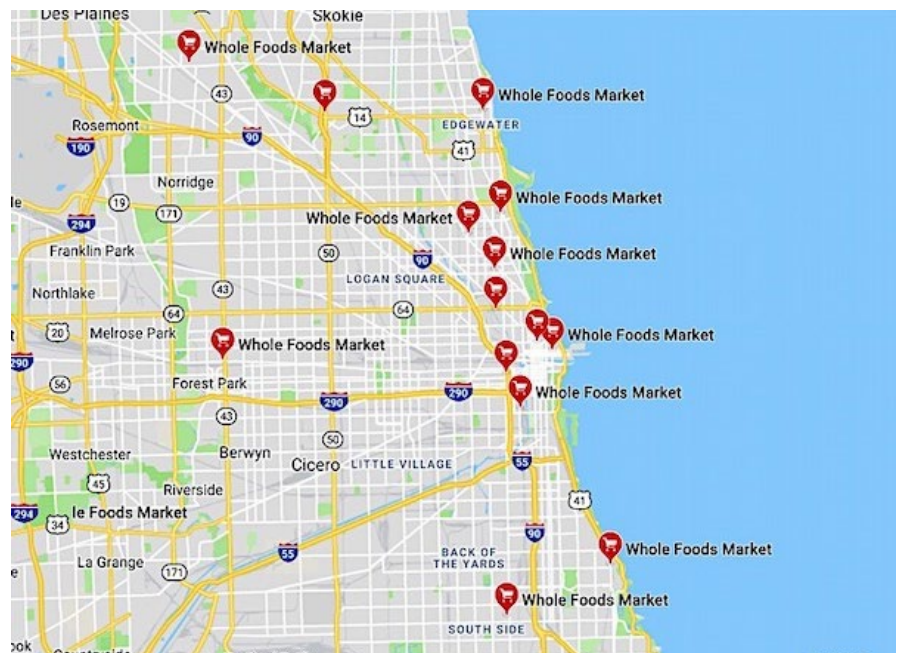
If risk is supposedly alleviated by predictive policing, it is not because instrumentarian power can penetrate social relations in order to identify certain behaviors and map criminal networks. Rather, predictive policing employs network science in order to construct risk index scores that already encode racial markers through historical data sets and neighborhood-based classification.[22] The result is that predictive policing creates the reality it purports to identify. Criminality as a behavior here is only legible under certain racist optics that imagine such behavior to be an accurate reflection of individual subjectivity. Extraction of behavioral information is certainly central to contemporary

developments in capitalist power, but it does not fully explain the range of ways that data is acquired, assessed, and implemented for increased profit beyond the consumer paradigm in sites like car insurance and predictive policing. Rather, one must consider the ways in which capitalism, especially surveillance capitalism, exacerbates social inequalities in order to reproduce itself.

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Zuboff's project is remarkable for its ability to blend sweeping theoretical prowess with granular accounts of the implementation and effects of behavioral modulation within specific technologies pervading individual quotidian life. However, extensive focus on the personal misses how structural systems of labor, resource distribution, and economic exploitation shape whatever processes of behavioral modification fuel the instrumentarian regime. Such focus also obscures the important work of grassroots organizing in order to resist the surveillance projects of local and state law enforcement and federal agencies. Among many others, organizations like Stop the LAPD Spying Coalition, MPower Change, Young Muslim Collective, Arab American Action Network, and The Audre Lorde Project call attention to the ways in which surveillant technologies and policies disproportionately monitor low-income communities of color and activist groups who protest anti-black and Islamophobic violence.

The work of anti-surveillance grassroots organizing offers far more forward-thinking analyses of surveillance capitalism's disparate impact and of the kinds of issues that targeted communities continually encounter. Moreover, their theoretical and practical modes of resistance are far more subversive, building coalitional networks to identify and counter social injustices through protest and disruptive action. By contrast, Zuboff's book can only offer a superficial vision of resistance through "the right to the future tense" and the "right to sanctuary" by merely advocating for the protection of democracy by "debate and contest afforded by still-healthy institutions" (519). However, what Zuboff fails to consider, but what the aforementioned grassroots organizations deeply acknowledge, is that surveillance capitalism in fact already guarantees both the future tense and sanctuary as human rights for those more privileged in our society, while many others are continually threatened by deportation, detention, and death—their futures foreclosed and sanctuaries disbanded by the racialized armatures of the militarized nation-state.



Screenshot from Google Maps with locations of Whole Foods storefronts within and just beyond Chicago city limits.



By way of conclusion, I offer an additional site of analysis that indeed falls within the definitional scope of surveillance capitalism but nonetheless enables us to peer beyond a white liberal framework that maintains the self-determined individual as the locus of capitalist exploitation. Importantly, this example calls attention to how local communities negotiate the infrastructural violences articulated by surveillance capitalism's extractive principle and the challenges posed to it by grassroots organizations.

As of 2019, there are about fifteen Whole Foods in and just beyond Chicago's city limits. Of those stores, the majority are located in the downtown area and in neighborhoods to the north, like Lincoln Park, Lakeview, and Edgewater—neighborhoods that are mostly white, middle to upper class, and enjoy priority in public schooling, road repair, and sanitation. Only two Whole Foods are in the South Side: one in Hyde Park, a neighborhood that has long maintained institutional affiliation with the University of Chicago and its efforts to push black communities to its margins; and one in Englewood, a dominantly black neighborhood whose dynamic and lively community is typically overshadowed by media spectacles reporting high crime and gun violence. Neither are there storefronts in West Side neighborhoods, like Little Village, North Lawndale, and Humboldt Park, all of which celebrate rich racial and ethnic heritages.

In August 2017, Amazon bought Whole Foods for \$13.7 billion and soon outfitted many of its stores with new gadgets and software systems. By linking Amazon's expansive data analytics with Whole Foods storefronts, Amazon has accomplished what Zuboff identifies as the "extension of extraction operations from the virtual world into the 'real' world" (201). For Amazon Prime members, there is a smooth and unfettered relation between one's online shopping experience and one's ability to access discounts in stores. Such consumers can also use a standalone app to search for new products based on order history and the behavior of other customers. Specific items in stock are determined based on local shopping patterns assessed not only through in-store sales, but also by Amazon deliveries rates throughout the city. Amazon Dot owners can even use Alexa to order products from certain Whole Foods locations for two-hour delivery.

At work here is a massive data extraction enterprise that enables Amazon to map customer preferences across urban space and modulate future online and offline behaviors for higher profit. However, given the uneven distribution of Whole Foods locations across Chicago's highly segregated urban terrain, we might wonder how proxies for race, gender, and class are present in the kinds of behaviors Amazon purportedly captures, as well as how the extraction of behavioral information might actually reinforce discriminatory zoning practices and strengthen urban segregation.



Advertisement from Amazon's website showcasing the possibilities of using Alexa-enabled devices to shop from Whole Foods with two hour delivery.



A food desert map showing the lack of fresh produce and grocery stores around the Englewood community.



Video documentation of opening day at the Whole Foods in Englewood.  
<https://vimeo.com/210543021>

Punctuating the South and West Sides are “food deserts,” communities that have limited access to affordable and nutritious foods, which contributes to lower standards of health and higher rates of obesity, diabetes, and other medical issues.[23] While Whole Foods is not the sole contributor to this problem, indeed the unequal presence of its storefronts across the city is indicative of the ways in which food distributors see some communities as greater economic treasure troves than others. The construction of Whole Foods in Englewood in 2016—often reported as a “risk” for the company since it was building in a “poor” neighborhood[24]—was one such attempt to address unequal access to healthy food options. However, fear of gentrification, outsourcing jobs to workers outside of the community, and outpacing local vendors spurred extensive grassroots campaigning within neighborhood, particularly from Teamwork Englewood, to ensure that the construction of Whole Foods would not negatively impact surrounding families and businesses.[25] Such organizing is adjacent to many other action networks in Chicago like the Black Youth Project, Assata’s Daughters, the American Friends Service Committee, and Organized Communities Against Deportations who understand that the issues surrounding the construction of Whole Foods in Englewood are not isolated, but rather they intersect with the over policing of black and brown neighborhoods, the repurposing of closed public schools as police training facilities, the expansion of the federal government’s Countering Violent Extremism programs across Chicago public schools, and the detention and deportation of people of color across the city.

With Amazon’s acquisition of Whole Foods the following year, things are not so certain. While Amazon may acquire data from online orders throughout Chicago’s city limits, the placement of Whole Foods in specific communities means that there is an uneven balance of whose data is being privileged as more important for economic investment by the parent company. The “we” in those neighborhoods

served more regularly by Whole Foods is not the same “we” that is considered a risk investment across the South and West Sides. It is not unlikely that in Amazon’s data analytics the Whole Foods in Englewood now bears the burden of the “black consumer” with particular patterns attributed to shopping and eating behaviors. All of this will inevitably influence decisions on where to build future stores and how other local companies conduct cost-benefit analyses to stay competitive. At stake are serious social injustices that cannot be explained away with emphasis on the consumer model or the peril that behavioral extraction poses for individual autonomy. Surveillance capitalism, like all other capitalisms, will continue to exploit data to favor some at the expense of others.

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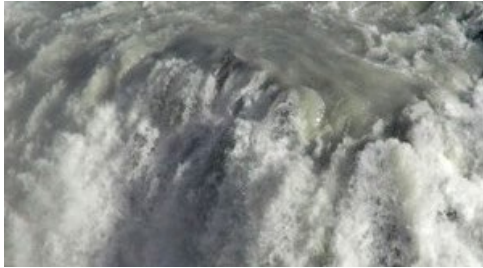
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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Water appears as a lively force in the opening montage of *Awake: A Dream from Standing Rock* (2017).



Water in the montage as a body in crisis.



The film, like the Movement it documents, centers water as its primary concern.

## Deep histories and fluid futures in *Awake: A Dream from Standing Rock*

by [Emily Roehl](#)

*Mni Sose*, the Missouri River, is “a relative: the Mni Oyate, the Water Nation. She is alive. Nothing owns her.”[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] From the spring of 2016 through the winter of 2017, two concepts of this river came into stark relief as the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and their allies set up camps in opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline.[2] The outlines of this conflict were documented both by Indigenous artists and media makers and by private security firms working on behalf of the oil industry.[3] While the local police and media represented the struggle as a “protest” or even a “riot,” the rallying cry of those gathered to protect the water was *Mni Wiconi*, a Lakota phrase meaning “water is life” or “water is alive.”

The company building the pipeline, along with its unofficial emissaries in the local police, saw the river as an impediment to the flow of capital and sought to protect their right to put a pipeline through it to get oil to refineries. This understanding of the river is consistent with the actions of the U.S. government throughout its history of broken treaties with Indigenous nations.[4] Water Protectors at Standing Rock, however, acted not on behalf of the bottom line but on behalf of future generations and non-human relations. As Jaskiran Dhillon claims, Indigenous-led environmental justice movements are “embodying long-standing forms of relationality and kinship that counter Western epistemologies of human/nature dualism.”[5] This is the kind of movement that coalesced at Standing Rock, a movement for and *with* water.

According to Dallas Goldtooth, an organizer with the Indigenous Environmental Network, the struggle at Standing Rock was waged on three fronts: on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter with the hashtag #NoDAPL, through independent journalism, and from a strong base of grassroots organizing.[6] The #NoDAPL trifecta of social media, independent journalism, and organizing was remarkably successful in raising awareness about actions in North Dakota, particularly as police violence escalated in the autumn of 2016. Throughout the encampment, #NoDAPL photographs, videos, and live video populated social media feeds around the world, drawing support for the cause in the form of donations, solidarity trips to the camps, and a mass Facebook check-in event on November 1, 2016, in which over one million users posted Facebook updates indicating they were at the camps in an effort to confound the local police in their social media surveillance.

Alongside the check-in event, which allowed remote supporters to “stand with Standing Rock” via social media, Facebook Live was a critical component of the anti-pipeline media strategy. This platform allowed water protectors on the ground to broadcast activities at the camps in real time. One of the most widely shared Facebook Live videos from the #NoDAPL struggle was a drone video made by Myron Dewey of Digital Smoke Signals, which documented the November 20,



Devoting the first two minutes to this watery montage, the film presents the #NoDAPL Movement as something as ancient, current, and future-oriented as the rushing water of *Mni Sose*.

2016 night assault in which police officers in riot gear turned water cannons on Water Protectors in sub-freezing temperatures.

The public outcry following this brutality, buoyed by the widespread dissemination of Dewey's Facebook Live video, was one of many factors that produced a temporary victory for Water Protectors at Standing Rock. In December of 2016, the Army Corps of Engineers ordered a halt to construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline pending a new environmental impact study. Within days of taking office, however, President Trump signed an Executive Order effectively reversing the decision, and the camps near Standing Rock were cleared beginning on February 22, 2017.[7] This might seem like a defeat for Water Protectors and anti-pipeline activists. Although the pipeline has been operational since June of 2017, the struggle that began at Standing Rock is far from over. The documentary film *Awake: A Dream from Standing Rock* (2017), co-directed by Josh Fox, James Spione, and Myron Dewey, powerfully illustrates that this fight and the broader movement for Indigenous resource sovereignty has been going on for a long time and will continue well into the future.

In April of 2017, two months after the #NoDAPL camps were cleared, *Awake: A Dream from Standing Rock* was released. The film documents the day-to-day experience of life at the camps in North Dakota, focusing on everyday tasks like raising tents and preparing food, ceremonial and prayerful events accompanied by drumming and singing, and dramatic displays of police violence. It is presented in three parts with a coda, each directed in a unique style. "Part I: Awake" and the coda, directed by Josh Fox, features an illustrated voiceover spoken and co-written by Floris White Bull (member of the Standing Rock Lakota Nation).[8] "Part II: Backwater Bridge," directed by James Spione, is filmed in an observational style that captures both the everyday and chaotic qualities of life in the camps as well as the near-constant surveillance Water Protectors faced from private security helicopters. The third section, "Part III: Standing Rock Through Indigenous Eyes," is directed by Myron Dewey of Digital Smoke Signals and is an extended interview with the filmmaker and a condensed version of the social media coverage he provided throughout the encampment. The climax of this section, flashes of which appear at other moments in the film, is the drone footage of the water cannon assault from November 20, 2016.

## Water in crisis

In an article on the role of media in the #NoDAPL movement, film and media studies scholar Janet Walker discusses coverage of the encampments by independent media outlets like Unicorn Riot and Democracy Now! as well as the use of new media tools like Facebook Live by Indigenous media-makers.[9] Walker's analysis of *Awake* focuses largely on the third part of the film, directed by Myron Dewey of Digital Smoke Signals, in which she draws attention to the way Dewey situates the #NoDAPL movement within the long history of broken treaties and Indigenous survivance. Indigenous historian Nick Estes has also written on the film, arguing that certain formal elements, including the repeated representation of police violence alongside scenes of everyday life at the camps, mirror the experience of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder.[10] Both essays argue for seeing the struggle at Standing Rock as part of the history of the U.S. government's relationship with Indigenous peoples—as a series of exploitative actions concerning land and resources that have been met with Indigenous resistance.

This essay will build on these observations and focus on Part I of the film, which is titled simply “Awake” and is directed by Josh Fox with a voiceover co-written by Fox and Floris White Bull, an activist and writer and a member of the Standing Rock Lakota Nation. *Awake* is organized roughly chronologically, and Part I places us toward the beginning of the struggle, focusing on the early fall of 2016 and culminating in the events that occurred on Survivor’s Day, known to settlers as Thanksgiving.

White Bull’s voiceover throughout Part I recounts the “dream” of *Awake*’s title, and the theme of wakefulness and dreaming is woven throughout the film. This essay proposes that White Bull is the visual and aural heart of the film. By inviting the viewer to both wake and dream with her, she provokes them to rise from an unseeing, unhearing slumber to face the harsh realities of energy development at the expense of Indigenous communities while also inviting the viewer to dream





Wet plate photograph of Floris White Bull (Standing Rock Lakota Nation) developing in fluid. Photograph by Shane Balkowitsch from Nostalgic Glass Wet Plate Studio, Bismarck, North Dakota.



Clearer image of wet plate photograph of Floris White Bull (Standing Rock Lakota Nation). Photograph by Shane Balkowitsch from Nostalgic Glass Wet Plate Studio, Bismarck, North Dakota.



*Awake* jacket art featuring Floris White Bull (Standing Rock Lakota Nation) in a vest that conjures images from earlier moments of

while awake to imagine new futures.

The film's imagined viewer might be understood as the audience for environmental documentary films more broadly: a left-leaning, politically concerned, middle class and largely white audience, a group commonly associated with mainstream environmentalism.[11] But this film also appeals to those who took part in the #NoDAPL struggle, people who see their experience reflected in its scenes of camp life and direct action. White Bull's challenge speaks to both groups: those inside the movement and those who interacted with it via social media and documentary film viewing.

Josh Fox supports White Bull's incitement with his distinctive visual style, which utilizes montage and rapid cuts of juxtaposed images to produce a sense of unease and urgency in the viewer. The narrative and aesthetic of Part I of *Awake* draws together vast time scales and documents the way Water Protectors took on the visual tropes of earlier moments of Indigenous activism, including the Red Power movement and going back as far as the earliest days of North American conquest. At the same time, the film points toward a future of resistance that reaches beyond Standing Rock to a vision of Indigenous resource sovereignty and averting climate crisis.

## Floris White Bull in two photographs

In the opening scene of *Awake*, the frantic strains of Arvo Pärt's "Fratres" underscore a watery montage: turbid and clear, choppy and still, we see bodies of water in daylight and under cover of clouds. The first image after the introductory credits appears to be a waterfall, white spray breaking from a tumult of roiling grey. The next moment, we see the dark blue-green churn of a river rattled by rain; in another, gently rolling waves are set ablaze by the setting sun; yet another shows the iridescent play of light on water, grey giving way to fiery salmon hues, scales of light shimmering on the edges of darkness. This sequence lasts nearly two minutes and introduces the film's principal actor and the focus of the #NoDAPL struggle: *Mni Sose*, the Missouri River. Before the voiceover begins, before we see the camps, before the title of the film appears on the screen, we are offered a moment to contemplate water. The intensity of the music and the turbulence of many of the water images produces an anxious effect—this is water in crisis. As a framing device, the opening water montage establishes the stakes of the #NoDAPL struggle while centering non-human bodies of water in the narrative of pipeline opposition. The film will show us human bodies in the struggle—peaceful bodies subjected to military force. But it begins by showing us the water alongside which these bodies resist.

Near the two minute mark of the film, the water montage dissolves into a hazy shot of a photograph developing in fluid. The sepia-toned image appears to be an old photograph but is actually contemporary, produced with the nineteenth-century wet plate collodion process. Though it is not revealed until the final credits of *Awake*, this is a photograph of the narrator, Floris White Bull, shot in profile, wearing a long braid and wrapped in a shawl.[12] This photograph resembles the work of photographer and ethnologist Edward S. Curtis, whose photographs of a "vanishing race" of Indigenous peoples at the turn of the twentieth century are iconic and immensely problematic due to their portrayal of Native Americans as romanticized subjects of the past.[13] Curtis' photogravure prints and this image of a woman emerging through water share an aesthetic sensibility, but the inclusion of the photograph at this point in the film, as a pivot between the water montage and the beginning of White Bull's voiceover, is

Indigenous resistance, including the American Indian Movement of the 1960s.



Additional wet plate photographs of Floris White Bull, including an image where she poses with a gas mask.



Additional wet plate photographs of Floris White Bull, including an image where she dons the gas mask and holds a “We are here to protect” sign.



American Indian Movement logo and Idle No More logo.

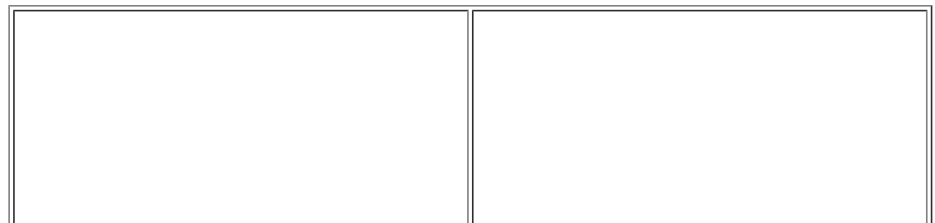
instructive.

This can best be illustrated by considering this photograph of White Bull next to another: the jacket art for *Awake*. Centered beneath the title and filling most of the frame, White Bull wears the common garb of camp life: a hoodie and bandana, goggles to protect her eyes from pepper spray, and a brightly painted vest featuring a flower and feather in clenched fists. It is important to note that the goggles are not covering White Bull’s eyes in the jacket image—she looks off into the distance in much the same way as the wet plate image. The angle of her gaze, slightly elevated toward the right side of the frame, suggests a view to the future. Between these two photographs of White Bull, we can see the film’s collapsing of time—past, present, and future—in the face of one woman. In the wet plate photograph, White Bull emerges as a figure from the past in traditional regalia. The series of images that White Bull posed for, which are featured on the photographer’s website, also include shots in which she holds a cow’s jawbone, dons a gas mask, and carries a “We are here to protect” sign. These contemporary images infiltrate the historical archive of Indigenous representation that Curtis is shorthand for. Unlike Curtis’ *The North American Indian*, in which the photographer labored to represent traditional culture without a trace of the trappings of modern life, this series of photographs of White Bull show her to be both a woman with a deep history (not unrelated to the representational violence enacted by photographers like Curtis) but also a woman of the present, self-consciously commenting on her own historical representation.

On the film jacket, signaled by her clothing but also by the inclusion of Water Protectors and a “We are here to protect” sign in the background, White Bull is located squarely in the present amidst a contemporary anti-pipeline action. The image on White Bull’s vest references both recent-past and present Indigenous struggles: the Red Power and American Indian Movement that began in the 1960s and the contemporary Idle No More movement. The raised fist as a symbol of political struggle has a long history in the visual culture of protest, not least of all in the Black Power and Red Power movements. From Huey P. Newton of the Black Panthers to the occupation of Alcatraz, the raised fist became a symbol of solidarity in political movements throughout the 1960s and 1970s and is part of the visual culture of labor organizing, the Chicano movement, feminism, anti-war activism, and environmentalism.[14] The American Indian Movement altered the fist symbol with the addition of the feather. The Idle No More logo also incorporates the feather. This movement was started by four women in Canada in 2012 and continues to advocate treaty rights and resource sovereignty for First Nations peoples. Their logo features a black fist on a red circle ringed in black. Unlike the Black Power fist that this logo resembles but similar to the AIM logo, this image integrates a symbol of peace into a salute of defiance, which represents Idle No More’s commitment to nonviolence as a technique of political resistance. Nonviolence was also used at Standing Rock.[15]

## “A shock from far away, an explosion”

As the watery introduction dissolves into a sunset view of the camp, White Bull begins her voiceover: “I had a horrible dream last night. I don’t know why.” Her dream is illustrated at first with a series of moving images of plants, flowers, and the night sky. She speaks of her seasonal preparations, of “chopping wood, drying meat, gathering berries,” and of putting her children to bed at night, “dreaming their Lakota dreams.”



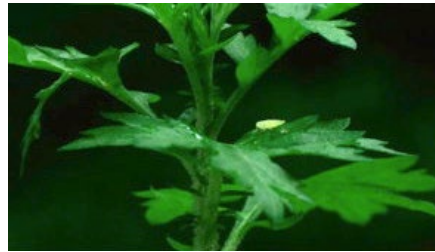




Sunset view of Oceti Sakowin, the largest of the Water Protector camps.



Close-ups of plants.



Close-ups of plants.



Still from a timelapse video of the night sky.

These dreams are swiftly interrupted with scenes of violence: police in riot gear, Water Protectors sprayed with water cannons, the fuzzy outlines of huddled bodies, icy spray and tear gas lingering in the air, which White Bull describes in the voiceover as “a shock from far away, an explosion.”



Water Protectors sprayed by water canons in sub-freezing temperatures on November 20, 2016.



Fog from tear gas and weaponized water hangs in the air over Water Protectors on November 20, 2016.



Hazy view of Water Protectors huddled together on November 20, 2016

White Bull goes on to describe a “long, dark moment” as a rapid succession of images of carbon infrastructure, natural disasters, and smoke stacks flash across the screen. White Bull relates that it felt as though she was “traveling across hundreds of years. All things became afraid. All living things fought to survive. Trees became fearful of being chopped down. Rivers ran scared of being poisoned.” These images identify White Bull’s nightmare as a vision of twentieth century development and its consequences: the unnatural disasters of industrial accident and climate change.





Oil pumpjack.



The cooling towers of a nuclear reactor.



Mobile homes washed away by flood waters.



Flares at a refinery.

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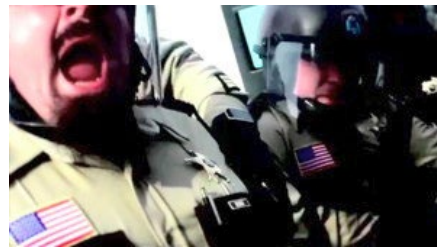
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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Police officer yelling from behind his visor.



Group of police officers with batons attacks Water Protectors.



Water Protector runs from a police officer.



Children at the camp sing and drum in a circle.



Plumes of black smoke and fire emerge from a grainy image of an industrial disaster.



Drone video of the Dakota Access Pipeline right-of-way being cut into the landscape.

Paired with these images of industry and offered as their counterpart, Part I of the film features numerous short scenes of police violence. Officers with their faces obscured behind visors, batons raised and mouths open, shouting, attack Water Protectors with pepper spray. In the midst of this brutality, White Bull's narrative returns to the future: "I looked at my five children sleeping in their beds. What would they do if their water was ruined? How would they live?" Her children appear in grainy, home video-style scenes, smiling for the camera. We see children at one of the camps circling a drum. The children and the young people of the #NoDAPL movement embody White Bull's vision of the future.

One of the central concerns of Water Protectors as expressed by White Bull is preserving the land and water as an act of responsibility to future generations.[16] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) It is unsurprising that the filmmakers include so many images of children in *Awake*: the #NoDAPL movement was a youth and woman-organized struggle. One of the founding moments of the movement occurred when a group of teenagers completed a run from Standing Rock to Washington D.C. in the spring of 2016 to urge the Obama Administration to stop the pipeline. As White Bull relates,

"The youth council of our nation took it upon themselves to set about the task of waking the world to our dream. They ran from our reservation at the center of the continent all the way to the headquarters of the colonial system, Washington D.C. They ran there to speak to the president and ask him, please don't destroy the last place we have. Stop the black snake and start the healing of this continent."

The danger posed to future generations and to the water on which they rely is identified in a sequence of images that flit between a fiery explosion so violent as to be almost indecipherable and drone video of the pipeline right-of-way being cut into the North Dakota landscape. White Bull continues:

"The dream went deeper, underground, under the earth—a fire under



Drone video of the Dakota Access Pipeline right-of-way being cut into the landscape.



Drone video of *Mni Sose*.



Engravings of the U.S. military attacking Indigenous people, likely a depiction of the Battle of the Greasy Grass.

the earth, the oil that caused it, spread everywhere, up through the water and into the scorched skies, rising oceans, collapsing cities, millions fleeing their homes, starvation, death, and ruin.”

In both the voiceover narrative and also in the sequencing of images, the film makes an emphatic connection between the Dakota Access Pipeline project and the many dangers of fossil fuel extraction and transportation, not least of which is pipeline rupture and explosion. It is here that White Bull shares the prophecy of the Black Snake and delineates the extent of the damage the pipeline will likely do:

“It was foretold that it would bring death, that it would be the youth that would rise up, and that behind them the mothers would rise, and behind them our warrior would rise. We the seventh generation are given the task of defeating it. It is called the Dakota Access Pipeline. It is proposed to carry billions of gallons of crude oil from the Bakken Shale in North Dakota to Illinois. To do that, it has to run underneath the Missouri River, the *Mni Sose*, the water source for seventeen million Americans and the only source of water for my home, the Standing Rock Nation.”

The scarred land images of pipeline construction captured by the drone fade into a sun drenched aerial view of *Mni Sose*, its natural curves a stark contrast to the aggressive linearity of the pipeline scar. In this moment, White Bull’s voiceover defines the mission of Water Protectors:

“In my dream, my friends and loved ones are sent to the last place on earth that still had clean air, clean water, unpolluted and uncontaminated. A great river ran through this center place, *Mni Sose*. We needed to protect the water at all costs.”

Moving from dream to reality, Part I of the film recounts a standoff between Water Protectors and the Morton County Sheriff’s Department over Turtle Island, a sacred site to the Standing Rock Nation cordoned off by police in the fall of 2016.[17] White Bull’s narrative compares the scenes of violence along the banks of the river to another battle waged between Indigenous peoples and a militarized state: the Battle of the Greasy Grass, known to settlers as the Battle of the Little Bighorn. White Bull states,

“We defeat fear every day. The battle raged for several days. It’s the same story of the Battle of the Little Bighorn. But it’s today. The police continued to abuse their authority with violence, just like the Seventh Cavalry.”

At this point, interviews with Water Protectors on the front lines are intercut with historical images, rough etchings of cavalymen attacking Indigenous people and shooting at close range.

These visions of past military violence are placed in sequence with contemporary scenes of police violence. White Bull adds, “It was as if this ancient battle was playing itself out right before my eyes. They came to our sacred burial ground we call Turtle Island. They walked upon the burial sites of our ancestors. We pleaded with them to leave.” Toward the end of Part I, we see the standoff reach a dramatic climax on Survivor’s Day, Thanksgiving. White Bull states,

“On the day that we call Survivor’s Day, Thanksgiving, as Americans all sat down to their dinner table, we built a bridge, a bridge so that people could get across to Turtle Island to pray and show that we’re still here.”

The police responded by shooting water and pepper spray at Water Protectors and





Morton County Sheriff's Department police officers stand atop Turtle Island.

surrounding the site with razor wire.

## "We are something new on the planet, but we are not"

The most generative quality of *Awake*, clearly communicated in Part I, is the way the film addresses time. White Bull wonders, "Was this a vision of the future, present, the past? I don't know. The Black Snake has been prophesied for generations." Here and elsewhere, White Bull and the filmmakers draw together the broad timescales of the #NoDAPL struggle. By including historical etchings and White Bull's rendering of the Black Snake prophecy, the film emphasizes the relationship between contemporary energy development and the over five-hundred year history of resistance to settler colonialism in the Americas.[18] White Bull also articulates the movement's present-day relevance within a broad range of anti-pipeline actions, stating, "The Dakota Access Pipeline is not the only snake there is. There are hundreds that are being proposed to drill across the United States." Her words are illustrated by Fox with maps of U.S. pipeline routes interspersed with scenes of pipeline explosions.[19] The veiny pipeline routes on these maps overlap to create confused webs that obscure large swaths of the North American continent. By intercutting these maps with footage of pipeline disasters, Fox makes an argument often made by pipeline opponents about leaks: it's not *if*, it's *when*. Pipelines will fail. Fox paints the present-day stakes of pipeline development with fire.

The film is also laser-focused on the future, which White Bull identifies as a conflict between oil and water: "The battle for the future is laid out clearly before me. On one side, greed, fear, money, violence, hate, and oil. On the other, generosity, faith, freedom, peace, and water." Robin Wall Kimmerer and Kathleen Dean Moore state this in similar terms in an article published during the encampment in 2016. They argue that the #NoDAPL struggle can be understood as a clash of two worldviews:

"On one side is the unquestioned assumption that land is merely a warehouse of lifeless materials that have been given to (some of) us by God or conquest, to use without constraint. On this view, human happiness is best served by whatever economy most efficiently transforms water, soils, minerals, wild lives, and human yearning into corporate wealth. And so it is possible to love the bottom line on a quarterly report so fiercely that you will call out the National Guard to protect it. On the other side of the concrete barriers is a story that is so ancient it seems revolutionary. On this view, the land is a great and nourishing gift to all beings. The fertile soil, the fresh water, the clear air, the creatures, swift or rooted: they require gratitude and veneration. These gifts are not commodities, like scrap iron and sneakers. The land is sacred, a living breathing entity, for whom we must care, as she cares for us. And so it is possible to love land and water so fiercely you will live in a tent in a North Dakota winter to protect them." [20]



Field dressing a deer at camp.

The time scales of these two worldviews are as divergent as their aims: the short-term gains of capital accumulation with its refusal to acknowledge the long-term effects of development versus a deep connectedness to the past and future that demands an account of industrial impacts.

The film's relationship to time is summarized toward the end of Part I when White Bull states, "We are something new on the planet, but we are not. We are



Food storage at camp.



Oceti Sakowin mile-marker post.



Water Protectors with hands raised and large, colorful flags amass on Backwater Bridge.



Water Protectors face armored vehicles and razor wire on Backwater Bridge.

something very old." Part I of *Awake* weaves together moving and static images of the past and present with White Bull's narrative, which she embodied on screen in interviews and through documentation of life in the camps. Accompanied by a series of scenes of preparing food and raising tents, White Bull describes Oceti Sakowin: "We have everything we need at camp. We chop wood, carry water, attend to the sick and injured. We create art, we report to the outside world, we cook for ourselves. There's no money, no electricity. There's no hate, there's no fear. There's no starvation, there's no homelessness." In words and actions, White Bull actualizes the future she ardently imagines for her children.

Not only does White Bull embody the dream, but so do the thousands of people who traveled to Standing Rock in solidarity. White Bull relates, "The first days on the blockage, we asked for people to come to stand with us. It was a shot in the dark, if anybody would hear us, if anybody would care. The camp grew along the banks of the Missouri River. We called it Oceti Sakowin, the Seven Council Fires. Thousands from all over the continent and the world came to pray with us, to face the fear with love. We call ourselves Water Protectors. We are here to protect the water." The dream the Water Protectors share is "so ancient it seems revolutionary." [21] One of the most recognizable landmarks at Oceti Sakowin is featured in Part I of *Awake* and communicates the geographic scale of the response from Water Protectors: a mile-marker post with many wooden arrows pointing in all directions toward the places from which people traveled. [22] Including an image of this mile marker post in the film communicates the movement's broad reach to outside viewers while also addressing Water Protectors who recognize it as a symbol of camp life.

Part I of *Awake* ends in the midst of an encounter between Water Protectors and militarized police officers on Backwater Bridge, the title of Part II. On a cold, overcast day, Water Protectors with gloved hands raised walk out toward armored cars flanked by razor wire. Giant flags flutter in the sky; a blue flag is painted like waves. White Bull intones:

"I am not dreaming. I am awake. I have been woken by the spirit inside that demanded I open my eyes and see the world around me, see that my children's future was imperiled. See that my life couldn't wait in slumber anymore. See that I was honored to be among those who are awake, to be alive at this point in time, to see the rising of the Oceti Sakowin, to see the gathering of the nations and beyond that, the gathering of all races and all faiths. Will you wake up and dream with us? Will you join our dream? Will you join us?"

As White Bull implores the viewer to join in the dream, to wake up and face the fear of seeing things as they are, the image cuts to black.

## "I am not dreaming. I am awake"

Through montage and voiceover, through image and narrative of past, present, and future, Part I of *Awake* conjures immense time scales, including the more than five hundred-year history of Indigenous resistance to settler colonialism as well as the future of Indigenous struggles against energy infrastructure. Images of Indigenous peoples, like the wet plate photograph of White Bull at the beginning of Part I, reference the iconic and damaging representations made by people like Edward S. Curtis, but do so with a difference: these images are placed in sequence with the very real, continued presence and struggle of Indigenous peoples to protect water, land, and life across time scales and across human and non-human relations. The film also examines the broad material scale of oil—the far-reaching effects of spills and other industrial disasters, including climate change, on air and water, land and bodies.

Both in the title of the film and in the language of Water Protectors like White

Bull, wakefulness and dreaming are keys to understanding the #NoDAPL struggle. Whereas the drone video of the scraped earth pipeline right-of-way represents a linear, settler conception of time and the seeming inevitability of fossil fuel infrastructure, the film's repeated use of images of water and White Bull's clear articulation of the struggle as part of a much older one asserts an alternative notion of time, of seasonal cycles and return, of circularity and reflexivity. *Awake* aesthetically and aurally collapses linear time, overlapping the past, present, and future in an effort to resist the forward thrust of capitalism in the form of unchecked energy development.

## Conclusion: "It was always we, the people"

"This movement has always been of the people, not of any government. It was always we, the people, that were always on the ground, on the front lines. It was always the people, common people, so people have to continue that. So although our camp is burned, it has sprung up thousands of places across the globe, spurring growth as the wildfires cross the prairies. The spirit of our people cannot be conquered because we are the spirit of the water and the earth itself. Our ancestors are calling on us. We have the chance to resist and to change America, the globe, forever. So I'll ask you once again: will you join us? Will you join our dream?"[23]

During its first six months in operation, the Dakota Access pipeline spilled five times, and the Standing Rock Nation continues to mount legal challenges against Energy Transfer Partners.[24] In June of 2017, a U.S. District Judge ruled that the Army Corps of Engineers failed in its assessment of the pipeline's potential impacts on the tribe. The Corps has defended its permitting process, and lawyers from the tribe and Earthjustice continue to pursue the case.[25]

The Standing Rock Nation also faces new struggles in the form of voter suppression. In 2018, the Supreme Court refused to overturn regulations in North Dakota that require voters to present identification that includes a street address. The law disproportionately affects Indigenous communities in rural counties, who often have post office boxes in the absence of physical addresses. The law was passed on the heels of the 2012 election, in which Democratic candidate Heidi Heitkamp won by a margin of only 3000 votes and had widespread Indigenous support.[26] In a response to the Supreme Court's refusal published by the ACLU, Ashoka Mukpo writes,

"This is an attack that must be confronted for what it is — a threat to democratic governance that will have the effect of taking away the most basic right of a large number of vulnerable voters of color."[27]

In November of 2018, North Dakota Democratic incumbent Heidi Heitkamp was defeated by Republican candidate Kevin Cramer. Even so, voter suppression across the country was met by a number of Indigenous media initiatives in the weeks leading up to the 2018 general election. For example, Native Vote, an initiative of the National Congress of American Indians, is a non-partisan online initiative that assists with voter registration and get-out-the-vote campaigns alongside educating people about candidates and voting rights and collecting data on voter registration and participation.[28] In the run-up to the election, Native Vote published a number of memes and videos online in their efforts to encourage Indigenous communities to vote. Using hashtags like #EveryNativeVoteCounts, #NativeVote18, and #WeVoteWeCount, they promoted voting via social media by drawing attention to the history of Indigenous voting rights, which were not





secured by law in the United States until the 1970s.[29]

Pipeline battles continue in the Dakotas. In South Dakota, which contains a portion of the Standing Rock reservation, the state legislature has passed two laws aimed at suppressing protest against the Keystone XL pipeline, which is slated to run through the state.[30] The laws require pipeline companies to cover part of the cost of responding to protests and demand high fines for anyone found guilty of “riot-boosting” or promoting protest. Environmental and tribal groups have condemned the laws, particularly the way they were rushed through the state legislature with little time for public comment.[31]

The #NoDAPL trifecta of social media activism, independent journalism, and grassroots organizing continues to be leveraged against the increasingly draconian policies of the right-wing government of the state and nation. Films like *Awake* are critical viewing in this time where Indigenous rights and the rights of nature are endangered by the policies and practices of the U.S. government. The film makes a powerful argument to heed the call of Floris White Bull to wake from slumber and dream with the Water Protectors at Standing Rock.

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## Notes

1. Jaskiran Dhillon and Nick Estes, "Introduction: Standing Rock, #NoDAPL, and Mni Wiconi," Hot Spots, *Fieldsights*, December 22, 2016, accessed March 16, 2019, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/introduction-standing-rock-no-dapl-and-mni-wiconi>. [return to page 1]

2. The Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) is a \$3.7 billion infrastructure project built by Texas-based company Energy Transfer Partners. The pipeline can transport 470,000 barrels of oil a day from North Dakota to storage facilities in Illinois and on to refineries. The first camp in opposition to the pipeline was established in April of 2016. The camps were cleared in February of 2017.

3. Energy Transfer Partners hired North Carolina-based private security firm TigerSwan to conduct multi-level surveillance of the encampment; this included digital and aerial surveillance as well as infiltration of the camps. Alleen Brown, Will Parrish, and Alice Speri, "Leaked Documents Reveal Counterterrorism Tactics Used at Standing Rock to 'Defeat Pipeline Insurgencies.'" *The Intercept*, May 27, 2017, accessed March 16, 2019, <http://www.theintercept.com/2017/05/27/leaked-documents-reveal-security-firms-counterterrorism-tactics-at-standing-rock-to-defeat-pipeline-insurgencies/>.

4. For an overview of the relationship between the Lakota and the U.S. government, see Nick Estes, *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (New York: Verso, 2019).

5. Jaskiran Dhillon, "Introduction: Indigenous Resurgence, Decolonization, and Movements for Environmental Justice," *Environment and Society: Advances in Research* 9 (2018), 1.

6. While this essay focuses on media representation, the importance of independent journalism at Standing Rock and the way movement organizers connected with media makers to combat mass media narratives cannot be overstated.

7. President Trump's January 24, 2017, Executive Order directed the Army Corps of Engineers to expedite the review and approval process for the easement under Lake Oahe (the disputed section of the pipeline that crosses *Mni Sose* near where Water Protectors set up camps). Within two weeks of Trump's order, Energy Transfer Partners had begun construction once more. For a timeline of the policy and legal milestones in the #NoDAPL struggle, see Rebecca Hersher, "Key Moments in the Dakota Access Pipeline Fight," *The Two-Way*, NPR.com (February 22, 2017), accessed April 7, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/02/22/514988040/key-moments-in-the-dakota-access-pipeline-fight>.

8. Josh Fox is an environmentalist and documentary filmmaker. Prior to co-directing *Awake*, he wrote, directed, and starred in *How to Let Go of the World and Love All the Things Climate Can't Change* (2016), though he is more widely known for his Oscar-nominated documentary film *Gasland* (2010), which

addresses the dangers of hydraulic fracturing.

9. Janet Walker, "Standing with Standing Rock: Media, Mapping, and Survivance," *Media Fields* 13 (February 2018).

10. Nick Estes, *Awake: A Dream from Standing Rock* (film review), *Environmental History* 23.2 (April 2018): 383–386.

11. For a critique of the mainstream environmental movement as a largely white and middle class concern that fails to address issues of social justice and the disproportionate effects of environmental degradation on communities of color, see the field-defining environmental justice scholarship of Robert D. Bullard, in particular *Dumping in Dixie: Race Class and Environmental Quality*, 3rd edition (New York: Routledge, 2000). For a deeper history of environmental justice that accounts for settler colonialism, see Estes' *Our History Is the Future*.

12. The wet plate collodion photograph of Floris White Bull was taken by Shane Balkowitsch at Nostalgic Glass Wet Plate Studio in Bismarck, North Dakota. Nostalgic Glass Wet Plate Studio online portfolio, accessed March 14, 2019, <https://nostalgicglasswetplatestudio.zenfolio.com/blog/2018/5/floris-white-bull>.

13. Edward S. Curtis, *The North American Indian* (1907). Taschen published Curtis' complete portfolios in 1997. The Muskegon Museum of Art in Michigan staged a critical reappraisal of Curtis' work in 2017, and while the museum's website does not host a page about the exhibit, it was reviewed and photographed by Sarah Rose Sharp for *Hyperallergic* on June 22, 2017, accessed March 14, 2019, <https://hyperallergic.com/383706/a-critical-understanding-of-edward-curtiss-photos-of-native-american-culture/>.

14. In the twenty-first century, the fist has become an incredibly fluid symbol, showing up in contexts as varied as Occupy Wall Street, corporate advertising, conservative political movements, the Black Lives Matter movement, music marketing, and the Women's March on Washington in 2017.

15. As White Bull states in her voiceover in Part I, "We are here to serve. We face death on the front lines. We will not be violent. We will not fight back in that way. We will not feed into the negativity. We won't give that negativity life; we will not give it our life."

16. The Standing Rock Youth Council became the International Indigenous Youth Council. As it states on their website, "The International Indigenous Youth Council (IIYC) was started and led by womxn and two-spirit peoples during the Standing Rock Indigenous Uprising of 2016 while peacefully protecting the Cannonball and Missouri Rivers against the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline," accessed March 16, 2019, <https://indigenouslyouth.org/about>. [return to page 2]

17. The moments of Part I that do not contain White Bull's voiceover are shot in a journalistic style and include short interviews with Water Protectors and observational filming of actions at and near the camps.

18. For a history of Indigenous resistance to U.S. settler colonialism and expansionism, see Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (New York: Beacon, 2014). For a consideration of contemporary Indigenous resource struggles, see Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

19. For example, the film includes news footage of the the Kalamazoo River oil spill of 2010 in Michigan, where an Enbridge pipeline burst and dumped bitumen into the river. The Kalamazoo spill remains one of the largest inland oil spills in U.S. history.



20. Robin Wall Kimmerer and Kathleen Dean Moore, "The white horse and the humvees—Standing Rock is offering us a choice," *Nation of Change*, November 7, 2016, accessed March 16, 2019. <https://www.nationofchange.org/2016/11/07/white-horse-humvees-standing-rock-offering-us-choice/>.
21. Kimmerer and Moore.
22. This signpost has been added to an exhibition at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington D.C., "Nation to Nation: Treaties Between the United States and American Indian Nations." The exhibition runs from 2014 to 2021. National Museum of the American Indian Website, accessed March 16, 2019. <https://americanindian.si.edu/>.
23. Floris White Bull, from the Coda to *Awake: A Dream from Standing Rock* (2017).
24. "Dakota Access Pipeline Leaks Start to Add Up," *The Takeaway*, WNYC Studios, January 11, 2018, accessed March 16, 2019, <https://www.wnycstudios.org/story/across-country-smaller-pipeline-leaks-start-add>.
25. "Standing Rock Sioux Tribe Renews Legal Challenge Against DAPL," Standing Rock Sioux Tribe Website, accessed March 16, 2019, <https://www.standingrock.org/content/standing-rock-sioux-tribe-renews-legal-challenge-against-dapl>.
26. Eric Bradner, "A voter ID decision could impact Native Americans - and the Senate race - in North Dakota," CNN, October 12, 2018, accessed March 16, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/12/politics/north-dakota-voter-id-native-americans/>.
27. Ashoka Mukpo, "Supreme Court Enables Mass Disenfranchisement of North Dakota's Native Americans," ACLU website, October 12, 2018, accessed March 16, 2019, <https://www.aclu.org/blog/voting-rights/supreme-court-enables-mass-disenfranchisement-north-dakotas-native-americans>.
28. Native Vote website, accessed March 16, 2019, <http://www.nativevote.org/>.
29. Native Vote Facebook page, accessed March 16, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/pg/nativevote/posts/>. "Every Native Vote Counts" video, *YouTube*, September 25, 2019, accessed March 16, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Li2pH\\_oLdeU&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR1Tvi4gaU9R2MI3PsbmsLkenUeQLlI8Wr5ffeyWW3OC-oF9VkpqpMlzV-U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Li2pH_oLdeU&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR1Tvi4gaU9R2MI3PsbmsLkenUeQLlI8Wr5ffeyWW3OC-oF9VkpqpMlzV-U).
30. James Nord, "South Dakota passes law to discourage Keystone XL pipeline protests," *APNews*, March 7, 2019, accessed March 16, 2019, <https://www.apnews.com/198de2dc96094036b2941f72dfoe6cb9>.
31. North Dakota State Senator Troy Heinert believes the laws will be challenged in the courts. James Nord, "South Dakota passes law to discourage Keystone XL pipeline protests," *Washington Post*, March 7, 2019.

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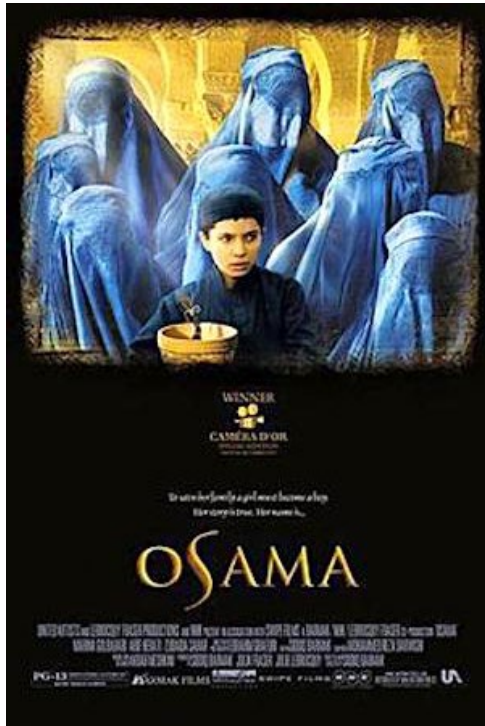


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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The poster for Siddiq Barmak's *Osama* emphasizes its main concerns: the story of the little girl, played by Marina Golbahari, who is centered in the image; and the condition of Afghani people, particularly women, under the Taliban rule.



*Osama* was filmed in Afghanistan. Its mise-en-scène reveals the country's landscape ravaged by war and terrorism.

## Docudrama's blurred boundaries: truth and fiction in Afghani cinema

by [Gohar Siddiqui](#)

Siddiq Barmak's Afghani film, *Osama* (2003), tells the fictionalized story of a little girl (played by Marina Golbahari) living under the Taliban rule. According to Barmak, it is a simple story, simply told:

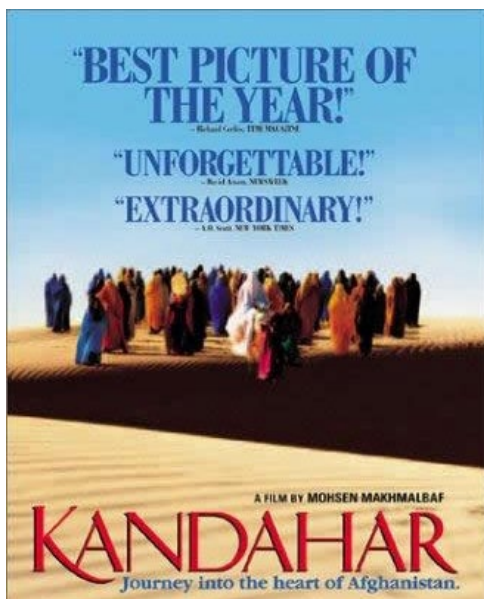
"My goal was to make the film for my country, my people, who don't completely understand dramatic styles or surrealism or too much poetry. We use a very simple, direct style to tell the story" (A. G. Basoli, 40).

The director's faith in the power of film, especially in a country where illiteracy rates are high, leads him to document the history of his people for his people. However, evidence points to a secondary but also important intended audience for his film: Barmak traveled internationally to promote *Osama*, which won several awards including the Golden Globe, thus indicating his address to a global audience. Even as he eschewed an experimental style for his people, Barmak's direct style is different from the usual mainstream cinematic fare about the oppressed. This unfamiliar form hails the film's viewers, its intended as well as non-Afghani audiences, differently. *Osama* uses a documentary style combined with neorealist storytelling to lay bare the reality of war-torn Afghanistan. This hybridity allows Barmak to work with a notion of fidelity and truth that complicates the binary of "either a naïve faith in the truth of the documentary image or of an uncritical embrace of fictional manipulation" (Linda Williams 65). In this essay, I argue that looking at Barmak's film through the hybrid construction of docudrama opens up a space to see how its form and content produces non-dominant ways of engaging with, and therefore critiquing, western images of Afghanistan.

Barmak's film is an attempt to undo some of the connections that equate Muslim bodies with terror that dehumanize them in non-Muslim eyes. The transnational, but largely non-western, production support and funding for the film already establishes it as oppositional to the global capitalist production systems that validate Islamophobic representations. Global Islamophobia has been on the rise post-9/11 and includes the ways in which anti-Muslim hatred has become globalized because of various factors coming together—western/U.S. imperialism, neo-colonialism, secular fundamentalism, and various nationalisms that repeatedly construct the Muslim as the other in film, media, news-reports, and political cartoons, etc.[1] [[open endnotes in new page](#)] The securing of this Islamophobia can be traced back to the War on Terror that aggravated the conflation of terrorist and brown Muslim even as the white rescue narrative repeatedly justified the war as saving Afghani people. Like older western imperialism and orientalism, gendered splits legitimated these attacks as well: the image of the veiled woman became the symbol of victimization. At the same time, the brown Muslim men and veiled women were also viewed as threatening, thus producing what Robin Riley calls transnational sexism. As she argues,



*Road to Guantanamo* (Michael Winterbottom and Matt Whitecross 2006) tells the story of four young British men of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin, who go to Pakistan, cross the border into Afghanistan, and due to a series of unfortunate events are unable to find a way back. They are then captured by Northern Alliance Rebels and later on taken to Guantanamo Bay by the US military. One of them is presumed dead and the other three, called the Tipton 3, are tortured and interrogated at Guantanamo. The film presents their story as one among many and argues that the US's War on Terror has targeted innocent Muslims of color who are the primary victims of terrorism. The film's stance is evident when it opens with a snippet of the speech by the previous US president, George W. Bush, who legitimated the attacks on Afghanistan: "these are bad people." In this, the directors position the US government's stance as one that refuses distinction between terrorists and Afghani/Muslim people.



Irani filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf has also raised awareness about the plight of war-torn Afghanistan through his film, *Kandahar* (2001).

"The logic of transnational sexism, while centralized around the assumption of Muslim women's oppression, is simultaneously contradictory: at times, it imagines Muslim women to be objects or victims in need of rescue and saving from local patriarchs while it also imagines these very same Muslim women to be subjects of terror and fear" (3).

Such a combination of global Islamophobia and transnational sexism forms the contextual backdrop of *Osama's* reception outside of Afghanistan.

Given the Taliban's total destruction of the Afghani film industry and the nation's poverty, it would have been impossible for an Afghani filmmaker to gain the tools to represent the reality of his country and people and to provide a counterpoint to the discourse of transnational sexism. In this case, the film's biggest funding support came from the Irani filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf; other industries such as Japan and Ireland provided additional funding.[2] In the contemporary moment where Hollywood enjoys global hegemony, these non-dominant, often state-run, fledgling industries produce a transnational solidarity that then enables *Osama* to be truly counter-hegemonic in its production, style, and content. Barmak rejects a purely documentary or mainstream narrative mode to tell the story about the impact of the Taliban rule on the life of a little girl. Here Barmak uses neither a purely documentary nor mainstream narrative mode to tell the story about the impact of Taliban rule on a girl's life. Borrowing from both genres, his film creates a defamiliarized text for the viewer which potentially leads to their awareness of their own involvement in the signification process.

The film's treatment of its story and its use of what I am claiming is a docudramatic style requires an active engagement from the viewer in constructing a sense of Afghani reality. For example, the name of the film, *Osama*, would suggest to the viewer that the film is connected to real events regarding the terrorist leader with an internationally recognized name. Combined with the news of the little girl on whom the film's protagonist is based, *Osama's* viewers would most likely expect the film to connect the plight of the girl protagonist to the very real living conditions of women under the Taliban rule. In fact, this character remains nameless—except for a brief moment where she is called Osama by another boy. That namelessness allows her to register in the viewer's brain in a relatively open way. The Afghani girl that Barmak selected for this role is named Marina,[3] and I have chosen to use the name "Marina" for the character partially for ease of discussion here. However, this rhetorical choice parallels my argument since I see Barmak's deliberate blurring of the boundaries between the fictive and the real in many aspects of how this particular character is presented.

Most newspaper coverage of the film and its director around the time of the film's release emphasized the connection between the realities of Taliban rule in Afghanistan and the script about a little girl who dared to defy them.[4] In interviews Barmak also recalls the Taliban's treatment of Afghani people and their dislike for cameras and cinema. The director was not only a witness to the Taliban's destruction of film and equipment but had his own confrontation with them. Such interviews influence the film's reception, adding to a viewer's knowledge that the film's representation of the Taliban is an amalgam of the director's own witnessing. For example, the constant fear that permeates Afghani daily life is reproduced in scenes where a Taliban member follows Marina to her home or where her mother tears up the photographs of her dead husband and of her own wedding when worried about a Taliban search of the house. The viewer becomes a witness to the film's documentation of this reality as well as an emotional participant through its affective invocation.

In addition to this direct reconstruction of events in Afghanistan that then add



Marina is imprisoned with other women awaiting execution. While the film evokes sympathy through her character, Barmak positions her as one amongst many, thus indicating a similar fate for women under the Taliban.

credibility to the film's status as part-documentary, Barmak's direct cinema style often borrows from documentary conventions to convey the "real" Afghanistan. More important, precisely because connotative Islamophobic meanings have been socially tied to Afghanistan's photographic images, the docudrama form destabilizes the fetishization of indexicality in these images. Thus, by playing a game of misdirection between fiction and reality, the film raises questions about truth or objectivity inherent in representations of the Afghani people by western media. This happens even as it posits Barmak's truth as *more* valid in depicting the complex reality of oppression in the country. However, the degree to which the film strategically counters an Islamophobic stance is polysemic. In particular, it depends upon the embodied knowledges and experiences a viewer brings to the viewing and witnessing of images that resonate intertextually.



Living in Fear: The camera is positioned just behind the Taliban member's head as he follows Marina when she is on her way home from work.



The reverse shot from inside Marina's home, shows his lurking presence as a threat that is a ubiquitous part of their lives.



A terrified Marina runs in to tell her mother that she is being followed.



Her mother, equally scared, takes out all their photographs from their hiding place and destroys them for fear that the Taliban may find them and then punish her family.

## Documentary vs. docudrama

Documentary's cultural status depends on a kind of faith that creates a truth-contract between viewers and filmmakers. Bill Nichols characterizes this relation between subject, audience, and filmmaker as deriving from the technology of representation. He argues,

"in documentary, we remain attentive to the documentation of what comes before the camera. We uphold our belief in the authenticity of the historical world represented on screen" (36).



This fidelity that is often assumed to characterize documentary is founded on an understanding of an indexical relation presumed between the object/subject, signifier, and signified—in other words, the relation between the actual object filmed, its representation, and an audience's reconstruction of this object and its interpretation.[5] At the same time, though, the fact of representation itself presents a paradox because the object/real remains absent; any representation is already removed from the reality of the thing represented. A representation, and



The film does produce veiled women as oppressed but it divorces this particular imposition of the veil and restriction of women's movement in public spaces from Islam, and instead presents it as an effect of fascistic rule. While Marina and her mother resemble these other images earlier on in the film, in this instance they have figured out a way to find a job for Marina by dressing her as a boy. Marina gets the job and they are able to eat for a few more days until she is discovered. They are still shot behind objects that show them as trapped in this world with little choice.



In *Road to Guantanamo*, bomb explosions are part of the re-enactment/reconstruction of real events. In this case, since it is told from the perspective of the victims, the reconstructed sequence of shots includes this kind of melodramatic blocking where Ruhel is in the foreground as he takes cover while the explosions light up the background that overwhelms the frame. Even as it remains true to the story, the scene evokes fear for Ruhel.

this is true of language in general, functions as an interpretive matrix over which the subject has no control, much like the image of a veiled woman as a symbol of Muslim patriarchy can become a tool in legitimating U.S. attacks. Moreover, increasingly with digital media, the notion of indexicality loses its power.

Nichols argues that there is no guarantee of an absolute separation between fiction and documentary and that fidelity lies in the mind of the beholder as much as it lies in the relation between a camera and what comes before it (xi-xii). However, commonly held assumptions about documentary still maintain those differences matter for viewers in terms of documentary's purchase on reality and objectivity. Thus, a documentary's differentiated status within media culture is a result of its form and purpose, but that status also depends on how documentary enters an intertextual reception context as already inherently faithful to an objective reality.

Its objectivity and pursuit of truth also partially derives from documentary filmmaking's historically colonial and masculinist roots. Because of this bias at the heart of its form, numerous filmmakers have turned to experimentation to wrest it into non-dominant forms. For example, talking about the war on terrorism, Bruce Bennett argues that

“one of the primary ways Anglo-American film-makers have responded critically to this global explosion of violence, and its spectacular hypermediation, is through a generic and stylistic turn to the production of documentaries” (210).

Still, documentary's privileging of a notion of reality and evidence makes it unviable to narrate stories where the truth might be rejected as just anecdotal or where objective truth is not knowable. In contrast, mainstream fiction film is well known for creating fantasy worlds and therefore does not carry a burden of authenticity, and it's assumed that differing genre expectations impact audiences differently. Such a division, however, is not absolute. Documentary films, despite their emphasis on facts, use techniques from mainstream fiction cinema practices: manipulation of the material through inclusions/exclusions; use of editing and sound to create melodramatic situations; and synthesizing events into a storyline to evoke pathos and maintain audience interest. Similarly, mainstream fiction film uses certain techniques from documentary for aesthetic purposes or to evoke certain responses in audiences—like the direct gaze of a character to the viewer.

As a hybrid of fiction and documentary, docudrama defamiliarizes both and draws attention to the blurring of boundaries within these two modalities. One effect of this mixing of modes is that it allows for the inclusion of stories that might not seem objective enough even as the docudrama genre emphasizes their truths. Other genres and styles as well, like Italian neo-realism or the social problem film, exist at the intersection of documentary and fiction, and I would qualify them as functioning in a similar universe as far as form and purpose are concerned. In this essay, I want to explore if, in crossing those borders of fiction and truth, this form and this film successfully reject the weight of orientalist and patriarchal filmmaking practices.

Docudrama is not new in using techniques from both fiction and documentary modes for rhetorical purposes of persuasion and in imagining worlds from non-dominant perspectives. Docudramas often tell real life stories of trauma by interspersing texts like news footage with recalled point of view re-enactments of events. The narratives thus exist at the intersection of various borders: documentary and drama, truth and fiction, objective and subjective modes, macro/global and micro/local scope, and masculine and feminine forms. As scholars have considered this mix present in docudramas, for example, Alan Rosenthal has speculated on docudrama's relation to reality and discussed its political potential, [6] and in a similar vein, Derek Paget has emphasized the form's power to tell stories that can perhaps not be told in any other way.[7]



In *Road to Guantanamo*, date and location are stamped on to recreated scenes to provide a timeline for events as they happened, thus combining the factual with the fictive.



The talking head interviews are intercut with re-enactments in *Road to Guantanamo*. The difference between the actual person and the actor is emphasized through this juxtaposition and by the lack of physical resemblance. Above: 1. Shafiq Rasul talks about his experience. 2. Actor Riz Ahmed plays Shafiq

Various films that re-enact a past accessible primarily through memory fall into this category. In this vein, here are a few films that tell the stories of victims of holocaust, rape, domestic abuse, the legal system, and U.S. imperialism:

- *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg 1993),
- *Bawandar* (Jag Mundhra 2000),
- *Norma Rae* (Martin Ritt 1979),
- *Monster* (Patty Jenkins 2003),
- *Provoked* (Jag Mundhra 2006),
- *The Thin Blue Line* (Errol Morris 1988), and
- *Road to Guantanamo* (Mat Whitecross and Michael Winterbottom 2006).

In *Osama*, Barmak positions the film's objective, narrative, and cinematic points of view from the perspective of the victim—the Afghani people—in telling the story of their trauma as history.

My interest here is not in defining the boundaries of docudrama. While scholars like Paget have delineated certain crucial features of the form that aid in understanding and analyzing how these aspects create an interpretive matrix, the form itself is leakier than most genres because of its hybrid nature. Films like *The Thin Blue Line* and *Road to Guantanamo* fulfill requirements that declare them a docudrama—talking head interviews, re-enactments, found footage, news reports, captions and intertitles. However, they also fit in the category of performative documentary as described by Bill Nichols. In fact, both Keith Beattie and Linda Williams discuss *The Thin Blue Line* as a documentary.[8]

On the other hand, the discussions of docudramas in popular magazines often emphasize their non-documentary aspect. For example, David Rose, writing for *The Guardian*, calls *Road to Guantanamo* a partly dramatized feature film, and A.O. Scott in *The New York Times* insists:

“It should be emphasized that the movie, directed by Michael Winterbottom and Mat Whitecross, is not a documentary.”

Controversies dogged *Road to Guantanamo* about its form and manipulation of viewers and used these arguments to point to its failure as a documentary. The film creates a narrative in which Muslim youth raised in England travel to Pakistan for a wedding and then cross the border to get Afghani naan. Once there, they want to help but cannot adapt to the environment, get lost, and are caught up in the struggle there. In showing the brutalization of Afghani citizens by the U.S. government in Afghanistan and later in Guantanamo Bay, the film directly critiques the imperialist rhetoric contained in dominant images and representations of Afghanistan and the War on Terror. What is at stake when critics fault this British film as not-documentary is that they reject the point of the film itself. Thus, on the one hand, these magazine articles create a context to contain the film's anti-U.S. interpretations by indicating the ways in which facts were fabricated or omitted. On the other hand, the film had a limited release in the U.S. because of the fear of its impact.[9] In this case, the need to contain such a film betrays what Rosenthal has claimed for docudrama, that it's an “important force for good”—a “special genre, a tool that, when used well, provides some clear and necessary observation about the world, occasionally even stirring [audiences] to action” (10). In shifting the Western perspective of an international viewer who is asked to identify with these Muslim youth and feel the injustice meted out to them, *Road to Guantanamo* potentially invites a critique of the government and its practices.





Rasul. 3. The re-enactments include mundane details that humanize the men, like this one where Shafiq tries on sunglasses in Pakistan.



*Road to Guantanamo* shows hooded and trussed up prisoners before their transport to Cuba.



The film shows that the treatment of suspects by US military included torture.



Among other things, prisoners were kept naked for 30 days at a time, threatened with dogs, exposed to extreme heat, and shackled in extreme positions.



Along with these re-enactments of brutalization of inmates, the film includes footage from Donald Rumsfeld's speech that denies the reality of torture of the Guantanamo Bay detainees.



In *Osama*, Marina, after her hair has been cut, looks at her altered reflection in a mirror.



In contrast to *Road to Guantanamo*, *Osama's* combination of truth and fiction is in some ways simpler. Despite the controversies around docudrama as a genre, or perhaps even because of them, here the hybrid form effects a viewer's confrontation with the moral quagmire and messiness of the Afghan situation. It encourages thinking about Afghan life in complex and nuanced ways instead of black and white melodramatic polarizations. Like many docudramas, the film is based on an event in the news that Barmak, while in exile in Pakistan, read in an Afghani newspaper, *Sahar* (Basoli). The story was about a little girl who pretended to be a boy in order to get an education and was subsequently caught by the Taliban. Barmak developed that story further—the child lives with her mother and grandmother in abject poverty. In the plot, since all male members of their family have been killed in the war or by the Taliban, and the women are not allowed to work under Taliban rule, the family is close to starvation. Desperate, her mother and grandmother persuade the girl to dress as a boy so that she can earn money. However, the child is taken by the Taliban along with other young boys to a *madrassa/school* to be indoctrinated into a Taliban version of Islam, where they eventually find out that she is a girl.

In creating a script, Barmak took liberties with the story, expanded the narrative, included details about Afghani life under Taliban rule, and created a melodramatic and exaggerated ending. Marina is taken to a hearing where a U.S. journalist is killed and a white female doctor is stoned to death (both happen off-screen). She is doomed to a similar fate as well but is "rescued" by a lecherous mullah and given to him in marriage. The film ends with her trying to escape but unable to do so. The fictionalization here exceeds the documentary impulse evident in *Road to Guantanamo*. For example, in this case there are no talking head interviews or captions. The film seamlessly encourages viewers' suspension





Boys are rounded up by the Taliban in *Osama* and taken for religious instruction. The presence of military remains a stark reminder of their lack of choice in the matter.



Moments of daily life are also shown in *Osama*. While rare, in these moments women figure out secret ways to find small joys like celebrating and dancing at a wedding. The rarity of these shots and the constant fear of Taliban shows how short-lived these moments are for them at the same time as they underline their resilience.

of disbelief necessary for immersion into a melodramatic story even as it maintains its commitment to reality.

Most would call it a neo-realist film, and Barmak's interviews make explicit his faith in this particular form to tell his story. However, as Luca Caminati argues, even a quick survey of histories of Italian cinema immediately points to the documentary quality of neorealist filmmaking, establishing a tie between the two on the basis of their shared "realist" ambitions. Caminati uses Nichols to argue that neorealist cinema is a fictional representation of "time and space in experience as it is lived," and it combines

"the searching eye of the documentary with the inter-subjective, thus identifying strategies of fiction, and the prioritization of victims as subject-matter."

While this critical observation about neo-realism is certainly true of Barmak's film, I'm more interested in examining the film as a docudrama because this particular approach emphasizes the importance of the *profilmic* reality that represents time and space as it is lived, as a historical real, through documentary's indexical bond. At the same time, it allows for the film's representation of resistance—as opposed to pathos even as it shows the people as victims. In the interview for *Cineaste*, Barmak discusses more than the story of the little girl in terms of what the film conveys—he mentions how the women protested when the Taliban would not let them celebrate Nowruz, their new year, and how in Herat, about 150 women protested when the Taliban shut down NGO-run bakeries that gave people bread every day (Basoli). His film incorporates these images of protests to form part of the background of the real (although embellished) story of the girl.



Women go to attend a protest against a background of Afghani streets.



Women protest for the right to work.

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# JUMP CUT

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## Misdirection: *Osama* as docudrama

In this section, I analyze the opening of *Osama* to discuss how Barmak's use of docudrama complicates easy understandings of truth and fiction. *Osama* plays a game of misdirection with audiences, which I argue inflects it as a docudrama as encouraging movement between two planes of action—the re-enacted and therefore fictive real, and the material reality of the background that constructs the realist fiction of the narrative. While it fictionalizes the story of the little girl, the film seems to be more interested in the mise-en-scène that seemingly constructs its cultural verisimilitude. But instead of receding to the background after encouraging scenic realism, this mise-en-scène also points to the indexicality of space and people—the ravaged Afghanistan that we see and are made to witness in the film and the actors that are people from Afghanistan.



Mise-en-scène of ravaged Afghanistan.



Interior and exterior shots function as putative reality.



Scene prior to execution of perpetrators by the Taliban where the courtyard is full of Afghans. The film's suggestion of the presence of a real historical past that it reenacts indicates that the actors here are performing their real past where they have been forced to be at similar gatherings.

Steve Lipkin argues that docudrama as a genre allows for a performance of the past and a performance of the real[10] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]; using similar words, Barmak emphasizes that “this film is about restoring [our] past to ourselves” (Emily Mayorga). The film thus has a doubled function through its fictional and the documentary aspects.

While the fiction is set in the past, the documentary representation provides access to the present that memorializes the brutal past. Since Barak primarily filmed in Afghanistan, the putative reality (the reality as it exists), the profilmic reality (what is in front of the camera), and the screened reality (what gets represented after editing and post-processing) become equated; the cinematic backdrop of destroyed homes and empty landscape is the actual site of Taliban destruction.[11] Similarly, the actors are people on the street, registering to viewers as real people. The screened reality in these moments changes in the film to signify an Afghanistan under Taliban rule; that happens through the audience's awareness of the material reality of these people represented on screen. But while the film privileges a seeming access to a truth through photographic fidelity, as I mentioned before, it also simultaneously provides a *performed* reality as an equal player in portraying a real that is inaccessible, that is, a real that exists in the past.





The camera focuses on children at the protest as they are carried by their mothers, thus humanizing both.



Another image of a child crying at the protest after the Taliban attack as the mother takes the brunt of the water spray.



The film's opening reveals Espandi, who is shot through a point of view of the white journalist's camera. The white hand is clearly visible, clarifying that this is Barmak's view of western cameras in Afghanistan.



The journalist pays Espandi again a little later to follow the women and take him to the scene of the protest. The touristic exchange is made

In that, the film performs this crucial function of enacting a past that was rendered inaccessible not simply because of temporal absence but also because of ideological manipulation of images of that past under global Islamophobia. The enactment and fictionalization are legitimated by the film because it is a corrective to the wrongs enacted on the Afghani people first by the Taliban and then by the War on Terror.

Crucially, the film misdirects through its form as well. The opening scene is filmed from a white U.S. journalist's camera and borrows from documentary tropes as it shows a first-person point of view into Afghan women's life during the Taliban rule. As the film opens with a point of view shot through a handheld camera, it focuses on a little boy, Espandi, who holds out his hand to the camera for money and a white hand hands him a dollar. The viewer aligns with the gaze of the white U.S. filmmaker, whom we find out later is a journalist. Such an opening is reminiscent of self-reflexive strategies employed by documentarists to remind the viewer that this is *a* point of view into the story, not *the* point of view—this is a subjective, not objective, lens.

A weird clanging and shrieking sound that resembles chains or creaking metal accompanies this image and overwhelms the diegetic sounds. This sound creates a dissonance, at the moment perhaps underscoring the harsh reality that the camera displays, perhaps paralleling the shrieks and vocal shrills made by women as protests later in the film. However, this dissonance as we find out very quickly, also signals this misdirection. That is, since the sound exists for the audiences, not the characters, its use is part of the melodramatic expressionism that suggests a particular stance vis-à-vis the image even before the image is present (in contrast to introducing an "objective" view of the reality). Also, a more perceptive viewer might note that the white hand cannot belong to Barmak; they would realize that the journalist is a character and that the film is no longer a pure documentary but one told through a fictive white point of view because it immediately creates a gap between Barmak's narration and the journalist's.

Another possible spectatorial assumption, at this moment, is that the rest of the film might be shot through the journalist's perspective, but that is another misdirection. Complexly, this opening shot serves to remind the viewer of the orientalist lens that is always attendant on any representation of Afghanistan and its subjects—that the camera's gaze is inherently disempowering, no matter who the filmmaker is—and then any filmmaker would have the task of interrupting and subverting that gaze. Espandi at times is viewed from the journalist's point of view through a high angle shot but such shots are edited alongside other eye-level shots, establishing an equivalence between viewer and subject. But here the viewer is diegetically positioned differently from the white tourist so that Espandi's returned gaze engenders discomfort with this viewing position because his gaze articulates a difference in power.

Very quickly, however, the film disengages the viewer from a strident first-person perspective. Espandi goes to trouble a little girl and her mother at the reporter's instigation. The position of the journalist to his subjects is based in othering—they seem to be what he is looking for, hunting for, and now that he has found them, they are harassed so that he can capture them and shoot them. The fact that their images look like other representations of Afghani women, oppressed and wearing burqas, only makes his work more sellable in the global market. It fits within the western narratives of Afghanistan. However, these central protagonists then get pushed to the wayside as the camera turns around to frame a seemingly non-diegetic reality of the protest. Thus, within the filmic narrative, the flow of the film abandons its fictional story in favor of digressions that appear as documentary reality (even though this is a construct). Such a move characterizes the rest of the film: the camera constantly gets sidetracked and abandons the ideological force of the narrative to observe the seemingly non-fictive.



explicit in this economic encounter between the photographer and the object.



Espandi's first encounter with Marina and her mother after being told by the journalist to go after them.

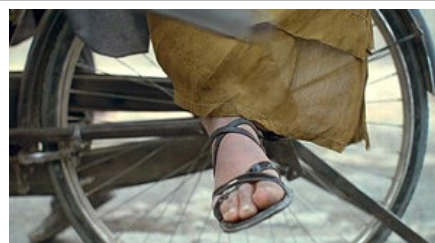


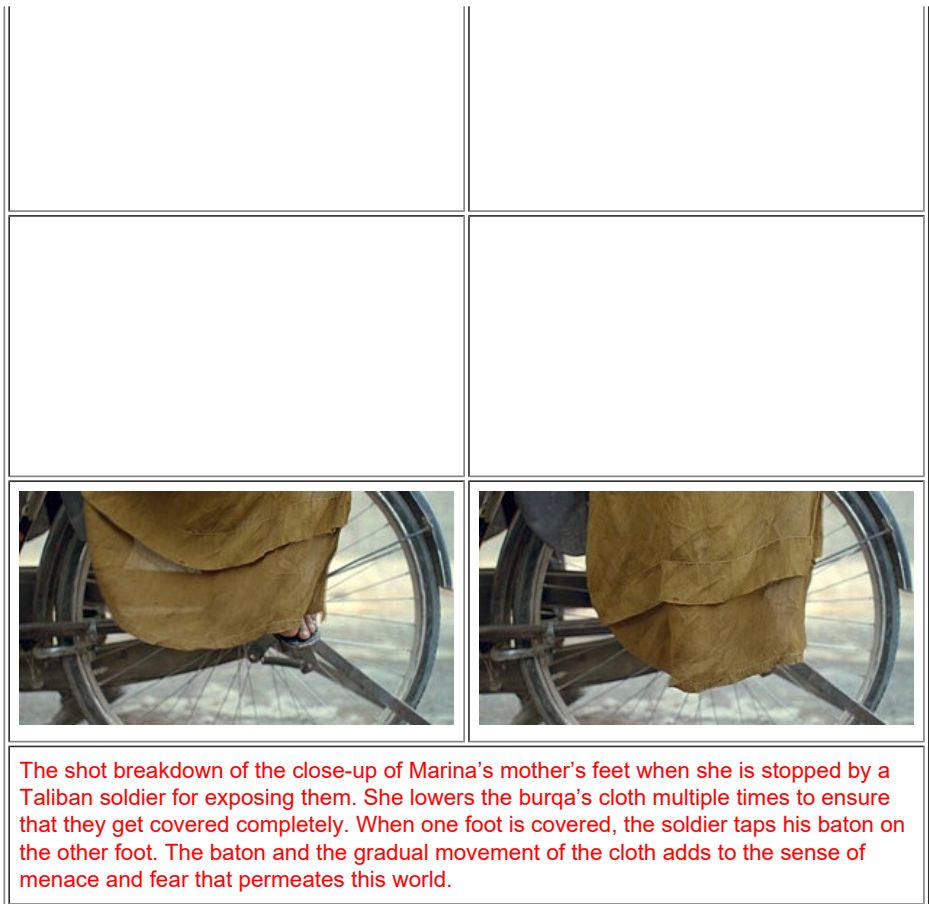
Marina's mother treating men at the hospital. The scene establishes the comfort with the lack of veil by the Afghani community as well as the expertise of the women in professional fields like medicine.

Repeatedly, the film falls into a sensational kind of docudrama. Its title seems to suggest something about Osama bin Laden; instead, the script deals with a little girl who is briefly named Osama.[12] Such misdirection continues in the film as it attracts viewers through promises on which it does not deliver and instead focuses its (and their) attention in a meandering elsewhere. If documentary is seen as a Faustian contract (I'm using Faye Ginsberg here) between the filmmaker and the subject, where representation designed to raise awareness cannot be decoupled from a simultaneous exploitation of the subject, docudrama sometimes gets criticized for using sensationalism as a way to profit off of the misery and trauma of its subjects. This film seems to be doing just that in addition to stereotyping Afghanistan and its people. Such stereotypes include white people shown as saviors, sometimes killed off for crimes like photographing or showing their face; in terms of villainy, the brown and old religious cleric uses Islam to keep a harem full of girls and women much younger than himself. The script potentially re-enacts what Spivak called the colonial rhetoric of brown women/girls needing saving from brown men, which has been the basis for U.S. imperialism in the country.

As problematic as these representations are, however, the film also shows how the Afghani men and women resist the system even as they feel powerless. The women use guerilla ways as work arounds. For example, Marina's mother is a medical professional and secretly treats patients to earn money that way. All three women—Marina, her mother, and her grandmother—are resourceful in figuring out ways to survive; the decision to dress Marina as a boy was a workaround to earn money in this world where women cannot work or move in public spaces without a male family member. The very resourcefulness and bravery with which they risk their lives points to the lack of options left for them.

Thus, in a chilling scene, as Marina and her mother are being returned to their home after treating patients, they are stopped by the Taliban. Shot in close-up, the camera focuses on the mother's exposed sandal-shod feet as she sits on the backseat of the bicycle. The scene is visually stunning, evoking dread when the Taliban member asks her to cover her feet. She lowers the burqa, then lowers it further until one foot is completely covered; the baton of the Taliban slaps against her feet as a warning; and she lowers it yet more until both feet are entirely covered. The slow, gradual movement of the cloth exaggerates a temporal lag, allowing for the viewer to sit with discomfort, cinematically prolonging the Taliban's fascistic imposition of non-Islamic rules to control women's bodies and throttle their agency. Simultaneously, throughout this scene and other scenes where women find different ways to find work, Barmak's film functions as a reminder of Afghanistan's pre-Taliban/pre-U.S./pre-USSR history where women had the freedom to pursue their personal and professional lives as they wanted.





Just as the film complicates simplistic views of Afghani women, it undercuts the stereotype of the threatening Muslim male as well. In another scene, when the Taliban leader pronounces his verdict of death for the white doctor, the terrified—bearded and turbaned—Afghani men who were made to assemble to watch the execution question such justice in the name of Islam. The camera again seems to forget what it is supposed to be doing (showing the killing) and instead goes to eavesdrop on a hushed conversation where one man asks another, “where are the witnesses?” and the other just shrugs, a clear indication that the Taliban’s rule has little to do with Islamic forms of justice or religious practice. In a single stroke, then, the scene establishes Barmak’s vision which critiques fanaticism—whether it is by the Taliban or by the so-called democratic states—and splinters the equivalence drawn between Islam and fundamentalism. Consistently, the film raises these specters only to divert attention to an elsewhere that for the filmmaker is more important, in this case social complexities that question Western stereotypes and point to the absent real of Afghani people.



Afghani men quietly question the Taliban's convoluted system of justice but are too afraid to voice their disagreement.

## Re-producing the veiled Muslim woman

*Osama* re-produces images of Muslim men and women but in a starkly different way from dominant representations. While the film shows bearded Muslim men as powerless and scared victims, it simultaneously produces images that defy understanding because they present a paradox to the western imagination—veiled women as oppressed but brave, loud, and demanding justice. The incident the journalist's camera seemingly stumbles upon in the opening scene is a scene of protests where women are calling out for *inqalaab*, or revolution. The conventions of documentary style in this scene encourage us to observe it in terms of the documentary contract about the truth of these representations as real. In this case, the women are protesting for their right to employment, allowed in Islam. The film thus lays bare various ways of viewing this world, almost admits to the impossibility of representing without participation in Islamophobic representations, and then subverts those stereotypes by defamiliarizing the very





At the protest, the camera reveals solidarity by focusing on small gestures like women holding hands for courage and comfort as they demand their rights.



Marina and her mother watch the protest. The camera alternates between them and the protesting women.



The Taliban's approach to quell the protest is revealed in deep focus as a boy runs in the foreground and the background reveals vehicles full of men with rifles.

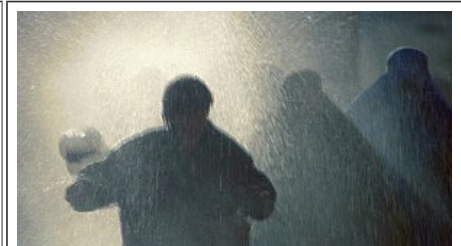
images that have seemingly fixed meanings surrounding them.

One of these images is that of the veil. In Western eyes, the veil calls up interpretations of absolute oppression that add to the overdetermined meanings of the garment as erasure of subjectivity. The women in this film are all veiled in similarly colored burqas that cover all aspects of their bodies including the face. This burqa is the version that the Taliban imposed on the women through their own un-Islamic interpretation of Islam. However, while the women might be the subaltern, in this scene they are vociferously speaking, and the film creates a space where they are being heard and made visible: this representation resists objectification and reduction into a stereotype. Theirs are the strident voices even when faced with the threat of imprisonment and possible death. They are represented as revolutionaries. Moreover, the veil simultaneously disallows a fetishistic viewer's gaze and enables a vision where the women as a collective become important. They might be faceless, but they represent a sea of bodies that are demanding their rights in an unfair patriarchal system. In showing the women, the film offers a corrective to the stereotype of Muslim women as passive.

While the scene is fictive, as I mentioned before, it is based on Barmak's awareness of women's protests on the streets of Afghanistan and therefore functions like a re-enactment of the real. In any case, by making the background so central, the film decenters the primacy of the main plotline as the protesting women become a digression in the fictive world's causal flow. Suddenly, as if the camera remembered its story, it meanders back to the narrative. The girl, Marina, and the mother who had been the focus at the beginning of the film become the central focus of the camera again. Visually different from the other women because of the color of their clothes, they had receded to the background as the protests had taken center-stage. At this point, the camera abandons its position as a (simulated) recorder and (unmediated) communicator of an event.



As the Taliban attack, the women scream and start running.



Water sprayed at the protesters make them disperse along with shots fired in the air.



The shot plays out in slow motion as the camera focuses on Marina running with the other protesters.



The slow motion exaggerates the attention on the child's face as she cries in fear.

As the Taliban attack and the women run, the narrative pace slows down a bit, as it moves away from the women to focus on the face of Marina. The sound




continues at the same pace but the scene unfolds in slow motion, making the viewer spend more time watching the expressions on her face as it conveys sheer terror. This movement away from faceless bodies to that of a little child as we still hear the shrieks of the women forges emotional empathy with the child and, through her, empathy with the women and the people inhabiting this space. The documentary-like coverage of the completely fictionalized protests is then accompanied by the doubled hyper-identification enforced on the viewer; at this moment in the film, Marina, still nameless, is both a character and a real child who perhaps experienced these atrocities. Addressing a similar kind of impulse in the genre of the biopic, Bliss Lim notes that the story of any life is a textual concoction that produces experience as meaningful (67). Here, the use of the real story is inflected through the technology of fictive film (close up, slow motion) to evoke empathy and pathos on the part of the audience and produces an experiential truth.



Marina is taken in by the Taliban after they discover that she's a girl.

In multiple other scenes, the film forges a connection between the viewer and Marina, who is bullied by other boys, taken into custody by the Taliban, and imprisoned with other women who were awaiting their death sentence for defying the terrorists. The narrative identification with the child combined with cinematic empathy and sympathy through close-ups on her face that reveal her pain, anger, and fear, evoke deep affect and pathos in the film's address to the viewer. The viewer also has a simultaneous awareness of Marina as a living Afghani subject who has survived the horrors of Taliban rule, and thus the film's depiction of her refuses an othered gaze on her. *Osama* repeatedly moves from the microlevel immersion into this world through Marina even as it continuously pulls back to show her within a network of women trying to figure out ways to live. For example, the women know how to quickly turn their celebrations into what looks like a scripture-reading session if they are raided by the Taliban; they fabricate lies to explain their presence outdoors when they are actually going to work. Indeed, Marina's mother and grandmother tell her that there is no difference between men and women just before they cut her hair and dress her as a boy so that she can find work to feed the family. This scripted movement between the micro and the macro and the individual and the societal reinforces a view of the group (and not just individuals) as survivors. The film encourages a viewing activity that includes spectatorial awareness that they are reading the film's representations against existing stereotypes.

## Conclusion

*Osama's* combination of fictional and documentary style allows it to both involve the audience and also keep them at a critical distance—it engages and alienates at the same time. Here these dual tactics of both engagement and alienation function to subvert dominant interpretations of Afghanistan, Islam, and Muslim people, particularly women. In this regard, it is useful to consider how critics like Annette Kuhn reject transparency of realism in feminist cinema because it lends itself to ideological manipulation. Instead, Kuhn calls for a counter cinema that does not mystify and does not position the spectator as “unitary and non-contradictory”



Barmak's film offers alternative images of bearded men and veiled women. This shot shows a close-up of an Afghani man's face just before his head is smashed down and the Taliban drag him away.



Women being taken prisoners by the Taliban. The same women resist and push against the gates as the Taliban try to lock them in. They know that their penalty is death but they don't

and allows the spectator to intervene and contribute to the signification process (251). In the case of *Osama*, the constant movement between two forms of documentary and drama actually cater to what Kuhn calls an anti-illusionist textual strategy and position the viewer in the middle. The resulting confusion does not let the viewer occupy a passive role as they have to actively make sense of the film.

The film thus seems to be involved in what can be termed as “oppositional hailing,” where it refuses a homogenous spectatorship or a unitary subjectivity for its viewers. The use of a fake documentarist journalist allows Barmak to manipulate the documentary form in a way that encourages certain kinds of perceiving an image. In the flow of this film's narrative, the viewer is encouraged to distrust the stance of the documentarian but trust the images because we are also simultaneously aware of Barmak at the helm. The film lays bare these layers that differentiate between the Afghani filmmaker's camera and other western cameras that have pointed at Afghanistan and Muslim people. However, despite this film's experimentation with form and content and use of non-dominant counter-cinematic tropes, the degree to which a viewer makes sense of these images that question their existing knowledge is unknown. Such an interpretation is also dependent on the sheer power of global Islamophobia that impacts image reception. Keeping in mind the pre-existing knowledges and perceptions a viewer has prior to experiencing a film, I would like to conclude by reflecting on the reception of *Osama*. I draw here from Vivian Sobchack's understanding of modes of spectatorial consciousness (242).

Using Meunier, Sobchack discusses documentary consciousness to explain how the term *documentary* is more than a thing but rather an experience where the film is co-constituted between the viewer and the cinematic object. The film is modified by the viewer's personal embodied perception of the existential reality of the objects and events (241). As a result, in watching documentary, the viewer engages in a simultaneous seeing through the image as well as focus on the object. Such spectatorial activities are usually divided. For example, in a home movie, because of a viewer's personal knowledge, the images and objects can be a conduit to evoke and access a past. While in watching a fiction film, the object gains meaning only within the world of the film and therefore requires submission of the viewer to the image. A viewer's engagement with a film moves between these two modes *to constitute the film*. In the case of *Osama*, then, the film encourages a sort of witnessing through the images of the actors and the space to interpret a real Afghanistan that gets constructed by the viewer.

For the Afghani viewers walking out of the film screening, crying, the film functions like Sobchack's home movie or *film souvenir*—they watch through the objects to re-member the past.[13] The fictiveness of the film does not register so much in these spectators' affective response because of the role of memory in

stop fighting.



These two images are re-enactments of familiar situations for Afghani viewers. The physical and psychological trauma resulting from the Taliban rule as well as the War on terror has left palpable marks. The image above shows a boy limping and lagging behind to exit the hospital after a Taliban raid. Barmak's camera stays stationary recording the boy's slow progress as everyone else hurries out in fear. The lower image is a close-up of Espandi's terror-stricken face as the Taliban attack.

embodied experience that influences their perception. For the non-Afghani viewer, the past is constructed as history—the true history even as it might conflict with other versions of this historical past. The film's faux documentary style reenacts the past, and presents an experience of history that is unrepresentable and inaccessible through documentary or photographic fidelity. Instead, it can only be communicated through such an artistic play with a hybrid form which enforces an emotional felt experience of the real that is made truer through the active participation of the viewer in constructing this reality. The docudrama mode therefore can be more effective than documentary in accessing certain truths and therefore, for western viewers, the film potentially functions like a channel to a past that is true, conflicting with their own understanding of that truth.

However, since the film also registers as fictive, it simultaneously undercuts its status as history while demanding a submission to the image as iconic. I am again borrowing from Sobchack who argues that in fiction film, the modifications a viewer might make are less because of lack of personal knowledge—the object isn't absent but unreal/imaginary (243). The fictive mode (with close ups, use of color, and slow-motion) produces objects in *Osama* as fetish, thereby drawing attention to objects as objects that acquire meaning within a scripted narrative (and not as a conduit to a something else somewhere else). The viewers have to reckon with such a film's reality as unreal and as a self-enclosed world with its own causality and meanings because it is fictive. Therefore, if we take Sobchack's discussion to its logical conclusion, in the case of a docudrama, even as viewers would trust these images as belonging to a historical past, they would also submit to the scripted representation of the characters and this world as defined within the film's own parameters because there would be no pre-constituted version of them outside of the fictive. In that case, the film produces a world where Afghani Muslim men and women are denied basic human rights; where women despite being clad in burqas are active in the revolution against oppressive rulers; and, where a family of three women are more courageous than the men.

Through the ending, the film then critiques terrorism because it makes the viewer feel horrible at the injustice meted out to both white people and Afghani people instead of positioning them at opposite ends as far as terrorism is concerned. The submission to the images in fiction that demands abandonment of outside knowledge then exerts ideological force over interpretation of these images. The act of interpretation then might lessen the power of Islamophobic interpretations or undercut them. The fictive consciousness encouraged by the film colludes with the documentary consciousness it simultaneously invokes; it requires a submission to these images as more believable even as they are constructed as historically real.



To complicate matters even more, while the real information does exert some influence over interpretation of fiction, intertextual references to other fictional texts overwhelmingly add to it. Sobchack mentions this aspect of genre as something Meunier discusses in relation to fiction, where the fictive consciousness includes the experience of viewing other fictional texts that recall certain tropes and images. The pervasiveness of Islamophobia and the U.S. involvement in the war on terror have been fodder for capitalist profit across film and media industries. Overwhelming images of turbaned and bearded men, desert landscapes with Arabic looking actors, and veiled women abound in international media including TV shows, videogames, and films. It wouldn't be far-fetched to presume, then, that along with a lack of actual encounter with Afghani life, for most Western viewers (and indeed non-Afghani viewers), there is a bias and knowledge arising from the fictive world that has modified their consciousness based on their embodied perception of fictive/represented images that have circulated intertextually through various mediated forms of cinema, television, pictures, etc. Even as Barmak's film complicates how its viewers experience these images, it also calls up other meanings that interrupt absolute pure submission to the image.



When Marina's mother despairs and wishes she had a son instead of a daughter, her aging mother reminds her that there is no difference between men and women. Her comment draws attention instead to the unequal treatment meted out to women under patriarchy in general as well as the kind operating under Taliban rule. While both Afghani men and women are oppressed, the fate of the women is far worse

The film, and indeed docudrama in general, muddles these boundaries between documentary and fictive consciousness and draws attention to the ways in which lived experience, encounters with historical reality, and previous embodied perception of represented images combine to create a viewer's reckoning with their other and, in this case, with Islamophobia. As a result, *Osama* points to understanding film's dual focus on the individual as well as the structural and institutional representations. It potentially refuses a culturally relativistic passivity on the part of the viewer, which is a form of benign othering where the neoliberal viewer, aware of racist ways of viewing and representation, might just step away from engagement by assigning it to "differences in culture." Instead, this film calls for active solidarity and need for antiracist work without giving in to pitfalls of the veiled woman as silent, lacking agency, and oppressed by brown and bearded men. To what extent it is successful, however, is limited by the location and awareness of a viewer and the extent of their own modified perceptions of these images.

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### Notes

1. See Peter Gottschalk and Gabriel Greenberg, *Islamophobia: Making Muslims the Enemy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007) and *Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Sentiment: Picturing the Enemy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019) for a discussion of Islamophobia through popular media. Also see Nazia Kazi *Islamophobia, Race, and Global Politics* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019) and *Global Islamophobia: Muslims and Moral Panic in the West* edited by George Morgan and Scott Poynting (Routledge 2016). [[return to page 1](#)]

2. Randy Kennedy provides this context while interviewing Barmak for *The NY Times*: *Osama* was “filmed over the course of a year on a budget of \$21,000, provided mostly by the Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf.” James Meek explains how Barmak had been unable to secure funding for films in the early 1990s and that Makhmalbaf financed most of *Osama* and then encouraged the Afghani filmmaker to send his film treatment out, which resulted in further financing help from Japanese and Irish producers.

3. Marina Golbahari is the name of the child actor who plays this role in the film. She remains nameless until Espandi, to stop other boys from bullying her, tells them that her name is Osama. Since she is only seen as Osama after she dresses as a boy and that too not for long, I have chosen to use the name Marina for her. Marina represents the fictional child of the news story but she also represents the real Afghani people whose story is being told simultaneously.

4. For example, Judy Stone, writing for the Canadian *Globe & Mail*, mentions how Barmak got the idea for the film when he heard about the courage of the little girl that cross-dressed as a boy to get education under the Taliban rule. The title of her article, “A Dispatch Written in Light: The Aim of Siddiq Barmak's Golden Globe-winning Film is to Focus the World's Attention on the Horror Wrought by the Taliban” underscores the connection of this real event to the larger reality of terrorism. In his interviews, Barmak has repeatedly mentioned the source of his film's story as the news report in *Sahar*, an Afghani newspaper that he read in Pakistan (Basoli).

5. See Hing Tsang, *Semiotics and Documentary Film* (11).

6. See Alan Rosenthal, *Why Docudrama?* (xvi)

7. See Derek Paget, *No Other Way to Tell It*.

8. See Beattie, “Believe Me, I’m of the World: Documentary Representation,” and Linda Williams, “Mirrors Without Memories.”

9. In his article for *The Guardian*, David Rose mentions the backlash for the film that renewed the defensive and incorrect response of the U.S. and the UK in neutralizing the influence of the story: “In the U.S., Pentagon spokesmen told reporters that the Tipton Three's claims were simply untrue... As the *New York Times* dutifully recorded, he emphatically denied 'the specific allegations of mistreatment made by prisoners recently returned to Britain'. Less than three months later, internal U.S. administration memos confirmed that the treatment described by the three men corresponded exactly to official Pentagon policy.” At

the time of his article's publication, the film was set to be shown in 18 countries but, Rose claims, the producer Andrew Eaton had mentioned that there had been no interest shown from U.S. distributors. A few months later, the film did get released in the U.S. but in limited theaters.

10. See Steve Lipkin, "Real Emotional Logic." [[return to page 2](#)]

11. In his NPR interview, while answering a question of whether the rubble everywhere was deliberately created, Barmak counters by mentioning its presence as the reality: "Everywhere you can find destruction of buildings, villages, etc. [It's a] side effect of war...people are also destroyed by war. All background...you see...destroyed city...destroyed houses."

12. As Barmak reveals in an interview, Espandi uses that name because he thinks it will scare her bullies.

13. See NPR Interview: "Afghan Filmmaker Siddiq Barmak." In this interview, Barmak discusses the reaction of the people who watched the film in Kabul in 2003: "People [were] coming from movie theaters and crying...maybe they found themselves in this tragic history." He had found Marina Golbahari outside this same theater, Park Cinema.

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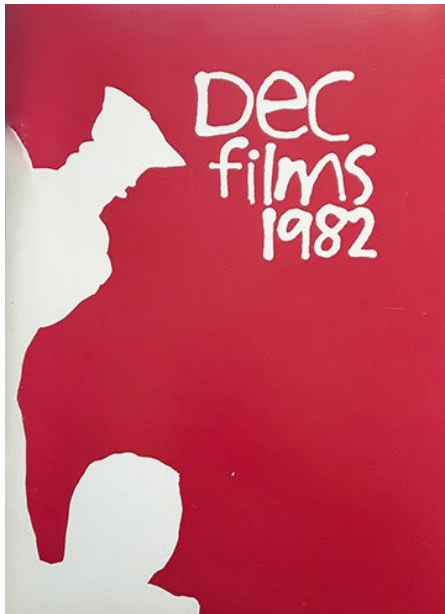
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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The most striking DEC Films catalog, from 1982, offered more than 100 films, both international and Canadian.

## The DEC Films story — to recover and reclaim

by [Peter Steven](#)

*"Whoever controls distribution controls cinema."*  
—Tahar Cheriaa, Tunisian film scholar.

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**Secret. Canadian Security Services. September, 1974.**

"The Development Education Centre (DEC) is a misleading name for this group. It gives the impression of being respectable and only interested in Education Research. However, closer investigation has revealed that DEC is in reality, a radical collective of ten highly political individuals, who are predominantly Marxist, and seek to promote revolutionary (non-violent) social change."

— Undercover report written for Canadian Security Services, "Third World organizations and activities." September, 1974. p. 14 (stamped "Secret" on cover page.)

## A child of the New Left

This is a story about a small piece of Canadian film history that's never been told. Why is that? Partly perhaps because the people involved didn't think it was worth telling or believed it involved events and activities no longer of value. Partly because the economic context changed or people moved on.

It's also a story untold because this type of cultural history is undervalued, or it seems we don't know what to do with it. Partly because we live, supposedly, in constantly changing times, accompanied by the "decline of historical thinking."<sup>[1]</sup> [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Revolutions in technology and media, we are told, make everything from yesterday superfluous.<sup>[2]</sup>

For roughly twenty years, starting in 1974, DEC Films was the leading distributor of left-leaning film and video in Canada.<sup>[3]</sup> Throughout that time DEC's staff-run collective operated a nation-wide distribution and education service, based on specific goals for political change and leftwing activist education. During the first ten years of the group, from 1974 to 1984, my focus here, the number of films in the collection jumped from 10 to 160, with revenues over that period reaching hundreds of thousands of dollars. By 1980 DEC Films had grown to a staff of four, and in 1981 I was invited to join them.<sup>[4]</sup>

DEC made a wide range of films available to activists and groups across the country. Without that distribution outlet, these works would have failed to reach a wide audience or have generated such extensive use. Before DEC, importing films was too expensive for community, and even university, groups. Moreover, leftist distributors in the U.S. and U.K. showed no interest in providing for the Canadian market.

In those first ten years DEC put films into the hands of thousands of groups, in every province — from fishing co-ops in Newfoundland to First Nations in B.C.; church groups in New Brunswick to the United Steelworkers in Hamilton; women's networks in Montreal to an El Salvador support group in Victoria;



The first catalog used a weaker, much busier design, but the prominent Zapata image emphasized that this was to be a collection of radical films. As with most educational distributors, the first DEC Films catalogs were organized by subject matter, specifically by region and country. Later versions mixed geographic with subject categories, such as 'labour' and 'women,' and through size of images

often gave priority to newer, stronger, or better-known films. [click image to see full size]



DEC Films was a child of the New Left and by the time of its birth in 1974 part of a rich new political and cultural formation. Toronto by 1969 had shaken off its image as a staid backwater. Here, Buddy Guy performs at the Riverboat in the city's Yorkville – a home to both the counter-culture and the New Left.



The 1960s and early 70s in Toronto featured ever larger anti-Vietnam War demonstrations at the U.S. consulate and in other locations within the commercial center of the city. Similar demonstrations were taking place in other Canadian cities.

Mennonites in Winnipeg, One Sky in Edmonton, anarchists in Waterloo.

Viewers were surprised and often shocked by the dramatic footage, but groups used the films for all manner of educational and organization-building projects. Even small groups, working for apparently obscure causes, were able through the film showings, to gain public recognition and support. But sobering images and the desire to educate oneself and others were not the only emotions at play – viewers also enjoyed many aspects of the films, including the inspiration at seeing peoples near and far engaged in political struggle and change.[5]

Needless to say, no channels in the dominant media, including the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), were screening films on the British miner's strike, the underground fight of Uruguay's Tupamaros, or the complex story of a maternity center strike among African American women in Chicago. No commercial distributor or broadcaster would show such radical and experimental work as JoAnn Elam's *Rape* (1977) or Black Star's *Finally Got the News* (1970), on Detroit's League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

DEC emerged from the Toronto New Left, in a period when, in the words of the historian Peter Graham, activists were beginning to see the benefits of combining the spontaneity of 1960s movements with elements drawn from the Old Left and New Leninism. Unlike many previous historians, Graham argues for a broad definition of the New Left, which by no means died in the sixties. As he writes,

“Hitherto-existing accounts of the Canadian left have misjudged the strength, seriousness, scope and durability of the New Left in Toronto down to the mid-1970s.”[6]

Other chronicles of the Left, for instance by Brian Palmer in his compelling book, *Canada's 60s*, emphasize the rupture caused by 1968, at least as felt by many who lived through it.[7] In Palmer's framework, that explosive year revealed something quite different from what came earlier, yet its burst of energy quickly receded at the turn to the 1970s. A debate continues, also in Britain and the United States, over whether to define the New Left within a short 60s decade or as a longer-term set of movements. I mention it to help us focus on the moment of DEC's birth.

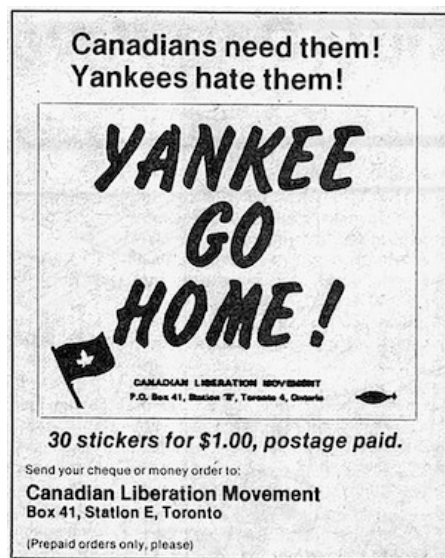
In Graham's more expansive view of the New Left, activists of the 1970s centered their work around the three principles of national liberation, community, and self-management. By this framework, DEC Films fits solidly within the New Left. Nevertheless, by 1974, DEC Films' founding year, the New Left had moved to incorporate the first stirrings of anti-racist organizing, the new movements of Indigenous peoples, the return of real working-class power within Quebec, and the fundamental challenge of socialist-feminism.[8]

From the beginning DEC said its mandate was more than straight-forward film distribution. It endeavored to work with a wide range of political, social, ethnic, and racial groups to assess needs, provide resources, and develop film programs suited to their goals. This remained an important difference between DEC and most other distributors then and now. For DEC the impetus for acquisition of film titles came from user groups as much as from filmmakers; at least in part then, it constructed a user-based model. Thus when revolutionary movements emerged in Nicaragua and El Salvador in the late 1970s, solidarity groups in Canada, which included many refugees, encouraged DEC to find suitable films for their educational work.

Of course, DEC was not completely alone in showing leftist films. Even within the National Film Board of Canada (NFB/ONF) the Challenge for Change/Société nouvelle programs (1967-1980), launched by Colin Low and initially coordinated by the U.S. veteran George Stoney, produced a significant number of radical films and videotapes. Many of these found life in political education and organizing. Some of the best included *You are on Indian Land* (Michael Kanentakeron Mitchell, 1969), *The Fogo Island*, Newfoundland series (Colin Low, 1967-1968), and the *Working Mothers* series (Kathleen Shannon et al., 1974).[9]

In Quebec the staunchly independent Vidéographe, a 1971 spin-off from Société nouvelle, and Carrefour International, formed in 1969 as a branch of the





The early 70s also saw the rapid expansion of more general anti-US sentiment bristling at the U.S. domination of the Canadian economy and universities. The New Leftist Canadian Liberation Movement attracted many academics.



The Canadian Voice of Women, formed in 1960, began with a focus on nuclear disarmament but quickly widened its concerns to include the war in Vietnam. Here the renowned activist, Nancy Pocock, speaks about the war's effect on children. Pocock, who was an active member of the Society of Friends (Quakers) travelled to North Vietnam four times delivering medical aid and assisting refugees.

international charity Crossroads, had pioneered video and film distribution combined with political education work. And in Vancouver IDERA began working in 1975 in the same manner as DEC with a focus solely on the Third World.

In the late 1970s in Toronto, a commercial theatrical distributor called New Cinema, secured rights to several top films from Cuba and South America. These included *Memories of Underdevelopment* (Gutiérrez Alea, 1968), *Lucía* (Solás, 1968), and others that had received enthusiastic runs in New York. The Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre (CFMDC, 1967) and Trinity Square Video (1971), also based in Toronto, played pioneering roles in the distribution of avant-garde and experimental work. Like DEC, their focus was on non-theatrical, educational audiences, though with a focus on arts audiences.

## Some antecedents

The earlier history of leftist film exhibition in Canada is barely remembered let alone studied, but magazines and papers from the late 1930s contain reports and ads for Spanish Civil War films screened by groups supporting the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion. In this context, *Heart of Spain* (Klein, Karpathi, Strand, Hurwitz, 1937), drew the most attention, partly because it included a heroic homage to the work of Canadian doctor Norman Bethune.[10] Scattered evidence points to a few other examples. In the 1930s and 40s, unions and Communist Party-affiliated groups screened Paul Robeson Hollywood classics.[11] The film historian Scott Forsyth, in his wide-ranging survey of left culture in the 1930s, notes,

“In 1936, the Clavir brothers, who were close to the [Communist Party of Canada (CPC)], formed Cosmopolitan Films, opened the Little Theatre at College and Spadina in Toronto, and ‘promised the finest of progressive films.’”[12]

In 1945-46 the Vancouver Branch of the National Film Society of Canada collaborated with “the short-lived Labor Arts Guild,” to present “an impressive series that included ... key works by Luis Bunuel, Sergei Eisenstein, Fritz Lang and F.W. Murnau.”[13] One of those organizers, Moira Armour, went on to help set up the Toronto Film Society, which in 1948 screened Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* and *Ivan the Terrible* in its first season. Armour also worked in Toronto with Maya Deren in 1951 on an unreleased film, called *Ensemble for Somnambulists*. During the 1970s Armour served as a film librarian at the Toronto Board of Education, where she purchased many films from the DEC collection.

During the 1950s and 60s the International Union of Mine Mill and Smelter Workers showed *Salt of the Earth* (Herbert J. Biberman et al., 1954); and in the early 1960s peace movement groups, such as Canadian Voice of Women for Peace (founded 1960) and the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (1960-1964) managed to organize several screenings of that film. Significantly, these peace and solidarity groups created a space for a range of leftists (both old and new) to work together—from the Trotskyist-centered League for Socialist Action (1961) to the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP), the Communist Party of Canada (CPC) and many independents.

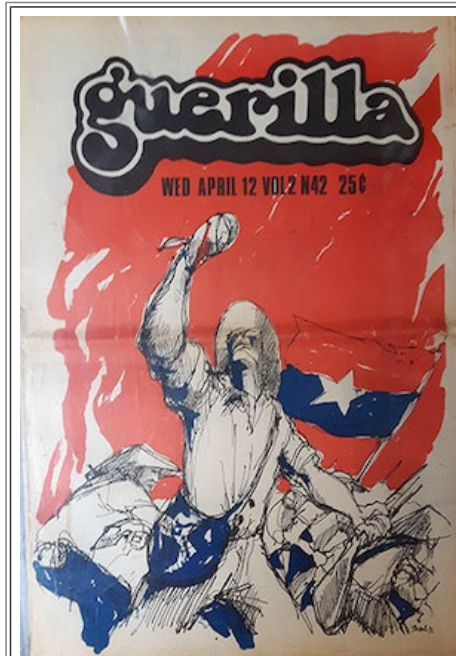
Immediately prior to the birth of DEC, Quebec activists used radical films explicitly for political agitation, in the name of socialism and national liberation. The key films here included Denys Arcand’s *On est au coton* (*Cotton Mill, Treadmill*, 1970), Arthur Lamothe’s *Le mépris n’aura qu’un temps* (*Hell no*



The early 1970s also witnessed the first explicitly political demonstrations for gay and lesbian rights. This image from 1973 shows activists from the small Ontario cities of Kitchener and Waterloo.

*Longer*, 1969), and Gilles Groulx's *24 Heures ou plus (24 Hours or More)* (1972.) These celebrated works rank among the most radical films, formally and politically, ever made in Canada. In 1976 DEC secured the rights to distribute *Le mepris*.<sup>[14]</sup> Also in Quebec, film activists, especially the indefatigable Yvan Patrie of the Comité d'information politique, emphasized the links between Quebec and the Third World in their magazine *Champ Libre*.

Despite these precedents, in the end no *sustained* models existed for this type of independent, political distribution work in Canada. Thus, for the staff of DEC it seemed like starting from scratch, clearly a project of the Canadian New Left.



The largest circulation alternative newspaper of the early 70s was "Guerilla," which attempted to speak to a broad New Left and counter-cultural audience.



In the mid-1970s the Trotskyist "Old Mole" delivered the party politics of the faction known as the Revolutionary Marxist Group. Several other "new Leninist" papers jockeyed for attention.

## Birth of DEC

DEC Films was a child of the Development Education Centre, founded in Toronto by **Jonathan Forbes**, in January, 1972, in rather downbeat offices at 200 Bedford Road. Seed money came from Oxfam Canada, at the time deeply involved in fund-raising for anti-poverty projects in Africa and elsewhere, but for various reasons unable to launch educational work in Canada.<sup>[15]</sup> Forbes wanted Canadians to know more about the countries where Oxfam was sending money; he also wanted people to understand that Canadian corporations, abetted by the Federal government, hardly qualified as innocent bystanders. There were structural and systemic reasons why millions of people in South Africa, Brazil,





The most distinguished film in the early DEC collection was Miguel Littin's *The Jackal of Nahueltoro* (1969), from Chile. It was one of ten prints acquired by DEC in 1974 as a project to launch left-wing film distribution in Canada.

Guatemala, and Indonesia remained poor and Canadians should not remain ignorant. This linkage of charitable fundraising and political finger-pointing toward Canadian corporations did not rest easily with the big NGOs and charities.

Forbes, who grew up in Toronto, had recently returned from six years in London, England, where he had been involved in the UK's long-established but growing anti-Apartheid movements. Prominent at the time was the legendary South African exile, Ruth First, with whom he worked on several occasions. Also important in his education was the Haslemere Group, based in Oxford, with links to Oxfam, which had gained attention in 1968 for its *Haslemere Declaration*, a radical analysis of world poverty. Its key point emphasized that

"exploitation of the Third World is qualitatively similar to, and caused by, the same politico-economic factors which are the basis of poverty in Britain." [16]

Forbes recalls that the launch of the Haslemere manifesto was a big event with upwards of 2,000 people attending at London's Roundhouse. Both Haslemere and the Anti-Apartheid groups had started showing films in their efforts to inform the British public about world issues. [17] In those days, says Forbes, "the Left was bold."



## Victims of raid at U of T fear they'll be hit again

Three stunned victims of a violent raid on a meeting at the University of Toronto on Sunday say they fear reprisals from the right-wing attackers.

Eight to 10 men, shouting, "white power," used chains and belts on people attending a meeting to support black liberation movements in Portugal's African colonies.

Five persons were treated at Toronto General Hospital after the attack and one said in an interview yesterday: "We suspect that if they hit once, they could hit again. But don't publish my

name. I don't want another attack."

The 23-year-old man said attackers sprayed Mace in his face, kicked him and struck him with a leather belt. He has a broken cheek bone and possibly a fractured jaw, and says he has to return to the hospital tomorrow for an operation.

The Sunday meeting, which included a film about Frelimo, a black revolutionary group in Mozambique, and the presentation of a truck to Frelimo, was organized by the university's African Studies Committee and the Toronto Committee

for the Liberation of Portugal's African Colonies.

Mike Carr said the Toronto committee would continue the weekly films but would arrange for better protection.

Jonathan Forbes, who was punched and kicked, said several of the attackers were identified as members of the right-wing white Western Guard Party.

But Guard secretary R. W. G. Smith denied responsibility, saying the attack was made by a group calling itself the White People's Vigilantes.

DEC played a role in film showings even before it set up its distribution service in 1974. The most important events focused on southern Africa, co-sponsored with OXFAM and TCLSAC. This mini festival at the University of Toronto was attacked by the right-wing Western Guard.

On his return to Toronto, Forbes approached Oxfam in an attempt to continue the same kinds of work he had undertaken in Britain. Oxfam was split on the issue. Some Board members were keen; others feared that political education which discussed the causes of poverty was too risky for a Canadian charity. In particular,



Jonathan Forbes, the driving force in the creation of DEC, had worked in the U.K. with a number of anti-Apartheid organizations as well as the Haslemere group that showed films as part of their educational efforts. Even in 1970, the year of this news item, the term third world is typeset in, as the British would say, inverted commas. Was this because the idea was new or because the awkward terminology already felt problematic?

talk about the role of Canadian corporations would draw the wrath of the Federal government, particularly when the spotlight turned to the mining giants, such as Inco, operating in Guatemala and Indonesia, and Brascan, with its rubber operations in Brazil. This applied particularly to the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) eagerly pushing its own form of “development education.” In the end Oxfam cut Forbes a check for \$5,000, presented him with forty boxes of research files, and wished him luck.

During 1973 DEC launched a number of initiatives and Forbes managed to secure some CIDA project money and thus hire several activists, all with contacts in labor or international education. These early staff set themselves up in true New Left fashion as a worker's collective, which eschewed hierarchy in terms of decision-making and pay. For tax purposes DEC created two corporate entities: one as profit making and the other as a non-profit 'education society.' A Board of Directors was also required by provincial law. For DEC's staff this Board served mostly as a legal necessity — useful as a form of support or guidance, but Board members should know their place. DEC would be a worker-run organization and staff would handle the important decisions.

Within the group a rough division of labor emerged, needed especially as new projects solidified into ongoing areas of work. Thus by the late 70s, in addition to film distribution, DEC included sub-groups that produced film strips, slide-audio tape shows and a regular radio program, ran a book store, and in 1977 launched a book publisher, known as Between the Lines (BTL).[18] By 1980 a complex book distribution system, representing BTL and several other leftist publishers, including Monthly Review, Progress Books, and Pluto, had also been created.

Through most of the 1970s all the DEC staff rotated in their duties and took on the three types of work: creation of programs and educational materials, the day-to-day tasks of the retail book store and distribution, and outside popular education. By the 1980s this multi-tasking was no longer possible due to the specialized skills required in both the creative and the administrative work.

Political education was becoming a movement in itself, especially focused on international issues with some connection to Canada. Up to the mid-1960s the New Left had focused *primarily* on nuclear disarmament and national liberation movements.[19] For example, the Latin American Working Group (LAWG), was formed in 1966 in response to the U.S. invasion of the Dominican Republic during the previous year. By the early 1970s LAWG had been joined by such groups as the The Toronto Committee for the Liberation of Portugal's African Colonies (TCLPAC) formed in 1972 and renamed in 1974 as the Toronto Committee for the Liberation of Southern Africa (TCLSAC). Toronto's Black Education Project, created in 1969 by Marlene Green, played a key role around education issues in public schools and included both long-established African Canadians as well as those recently arrived from the Caribbean. Finally, the quiet and then not-so quiet revolutions in Quebec fostered a new, sometimes rather desperate need for the Canadian left to catch up to Quebec.[20]

Ian McKay, another influential historian of the Canadian left, argues that history reveals what he calls “matrix-events,” such as the explosive year 1968. These eventually lead to the birth of new formations of the left and an attempt to systematize and consolidate. In addition, key events and new formations are accompanied by what the religious describe as an epiphany and what Gramsci termed a *supersedure*. In other words people don’t simply find themselves in a new political reality they also experience a new sense of living differently.[21] This New Left formation, in the process of consolidation in the early 1970s, also goes through what might be characterized as an immanent critique and the matrix-event of socialist feminism.

The moment of birth for DEC thus takes place at a time when dozens of new organizations, consciousness-raising groups, magazines, books, and films are all trying to consolidate, make concrete, and educate. For McKay,

[illegible][illegible]

Pages from first DEC catalog, 1974. [click image to see large]

“What each left organization seeks to build is a *formation*, a way of disseminating its system of concepts through a much wider social network.”[22]

	
<p>Humberto Rios's <i>Cry of the People</i> (Bolivia, 1972) provides a Marxist history of Bolivia.</p>	<p>The film pays particular attention to the Indigenous miners, many of whom worked for international corporations.</p>
	 <p>Rios, with camera, in Bolivia, 1972.</p>
<p>The film was one of the original ten in the collection.</p>	<p>DEC staff had met Rios and other prominent South American filmmakers at the Montreal <i>Rencontres internationales pour un nouveau cinema</i>.</p>

By February, 1974, DEC was ready to take advantage of its organizational abilities, access to resources, and educational networks to launch a film distribution service. The models of the Tricontinental Film Center in New York and The Other Cinema in London showed that enthusiastic audiences were seeking this work and the venture could be financially healthy. It certainly made sense to secure Canadian distribution rights rather than continually rent from outside the country (with the additional costs of shipping and import duties).

DEC was also eager to embark on film distribution following its participation in Montreal's *Rencontres internationales pour un nouveau cinema*, held in 1974. That conference drew participants from Europe, Africa, and the Americas, and helped establish many networks of filmmakers and political distributors. It also reflected the primacy of Quebec's political cinema and that of its internationally-focused organizers – people such as André Pâquet. DEC's delegation returned with ambitious plans and dozens of contacts. They framed their work as part of an international project of solidarity.[23]

In 1973 DEC hired **Kae Elgie**, an accomplished researcher who had worked in southern Africa and with TCLSAC. Significantly, Elgie had helped organize the successful “Cinema of Solidarity” in Toronto. That series not only raised several thousand dollars for TCLSAC projects but showed the potential for ongoing education through political cinema. Unsurprisingly, the ongoing TCLSAC series also drew the attention of Toronto's Western Guard, a frequently violent neo-fascist outfit, founded in 1972. This was a small, but dangerous group. In April 1974 Western Guard members, shouting “White Power,” attacked and disrupted a large TCLSAC/Oxfam/DEC screening at the University of Toronto. Forbes and five others landed in hospital and eventually his attacker served a month in jail for the assault.[24] Others, particularly in the African-Canadian communities, faced more alarming attacks. Leonard and Gwendolyn Johnson's Third World Books and Crafts, a few blocks away from DEC, had its front windows smashed by gunfire by suspected Western Guard members.[25]



Viewers familiar with Walter Salles *Motorcycle Diaries* (Brazil, 2004), a portrait of the young Che Guevara, will see many documentary motifs borrowed from *Cry of the People*, including this moment near the end of the film where participants are shot in black and white, frontally, standing very still and staring out to the audience as if to say “don't forget about me.”

Rios and his film partners Raymundo Gleyzer

and Juana Sapire would certainly have known about Che's well known journey twenty years previously, which placed South America's Indigenous peoples at the heart of the struggle for a revolutionary future.



Ríos analyzing his life's work in the Argentinian TV program *Vidas de Película - Generation del 60*, 2011. (Youtube).

Elgie began her work at DEC with a productive trip to New York to meet with and learn from Tricontinental, a leading U.S. distributor founded in 1970 by two dynamic and well-connected brothers from Argentina, Rudolfo and Carlos Broullón. In particular Elgie benefitted from the experience and generosity of Tricon's key staff person Gary Crowdus.[26] From Crowdus came the arcane business knowledge of film distribution and legal contracts with producers. Following the Tricontinental model, DEC set up their contracts on a 50/50 split with producers from rentals and sales.

After several weeks Elgie returned to Canada with a carefully chosen collection of ten 16mm prints and a generous agreement with Tricon to strike future prints from their negatives in New York labs. Miguel Littin's *The Jackal of Nahueltoro* (Chile, 1969) leapt out as the most significant film in the list but others, especially Raymundo Gleyzer's *Mexico: Frozen Revolution* (Argentina, 1971) and Humberto Ríos's *Cry of the People* (Argentina, 1972) on Bolivia, found larger audiences across Canada in the next years. Perhaps the most radical film in the group was *Finally Got the News* (Stewart Bird et al., 1970), set in Detroit and featuring the straight-to-the-camera politics of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.[27] Elgie recalls that her high hopes for the film led to some disappointment when others didn't share her enthusiasm.[28]

DEC had already created a structure for the production and distribution of film strips, slide-tape shows and educational kits. These explored both international and national issues with titles such as *Third World: Development of Underdevelopment* and *James Bay: Development for Whom?* Dec's first forays into production were usually supplemented by tours and workshops led by staff. The group could also cross-promote its productions for free through its radio and book distribution work, although by today's standards promotion activities were decidedly underdeveloped in DEC's early years.

Following the success of Elgie's work between 1973 and 1975, DEC began to add more staff from a variety of backgrounds. The 1976 catalogue reflects that growth and diversity in a collection that tackled issues moving well beyond Third World solidarity, to encompass the North American and Western European working-class, women's movements, anti-racism, and environmental threats. In addition to Littin and Gleyzer, the range of creators and production groups included Anand Patwardhan, India; Jan Lindquist, Sweden; Cinema Action and the London Women's Film Group, UK; the Union of Atomic Workers, France; Newsreel and Third World Newsreel, New York.

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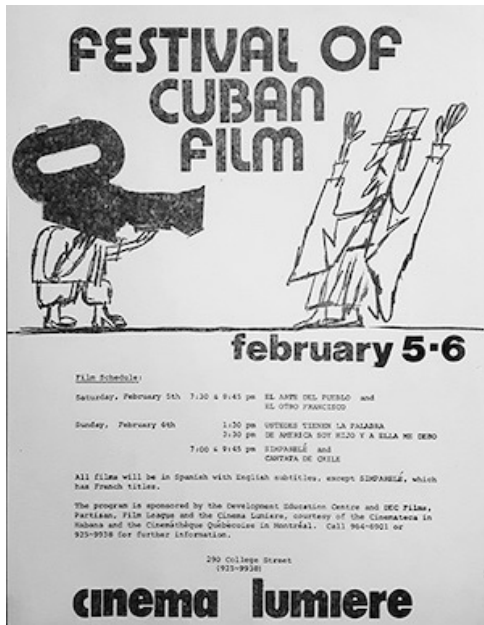
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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Beyond distribution



DEC's Cuban Film Festival in 1977 became the group's first major foray into exhibition and was organized in collaboration with the Cinemateca in Havana and Toronto's Partisan and Film League groups. As in many other instances, Gary Crowdus in New York played a key role as a DEC ally. Flyer with Mike Constable illustration.



One of the most widely used Cuban films in the 1970s was Santiago Alvarez's dramatic documentary *NOW* (1965). As mentioned below, the DEC print appeared and disappeared mysteriously from the collection.

**Glen Richards** joined Elgie and Forbes in 1974, bringing with him first-hand knowledge of various Marxist and Maoist networks in Ontario and strong views on film. Throughout his time at DEC and after, Richards also played a key role in The Film League, a documentary collective that created several innovative labor films.

Richards made two significant research trips for DEC, one to Europe – Paris, Stockholm, London – and a later one to Cuba. He remembers that money to attend the Stockholm Festival of New Cinema events came again via André Pâquet in Montreal, who continued to facilitate significant international exchanges for DEC and many others throughout the 1970s.[29] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) The European trip established many ongoing connections with political filmmakers for Richards and DEC, many of whom then made the trek to Canada. One such group was Cinema Action, in London, makers of *The Miner's Film* (1975).

Richards helped shape a number of smaller exhibition initiatives, called Film Forums, conceived in part as preparation for more ambitious events, which became known as Reel to Real, in 1979 and '80:

“We started the Film Forums, in 1975, with local filmmakers and invited them to participate in discussions with the audience.”[30]

The goal with all these events was to co-plan and co-sponsor the festivals with leftwing community, political, and union groups. In the short term, the strategy aimed to build an audience through existing groups, but beyond that to work toward more general political organizing.

Richards was also keen to link up with the Partisan Group (formed mid-70s) which operated a gallery dedicated to left-wing art and included New Leftists and 'hip' CPCers, some of whom were older, former blacklisted figures from the Cold War days. The well-known artist, cartoonist, giant puppet-maker, and activist Mike Constable was a key member. Peter Graham writes,

“The seeds for the Partisan Gallery were sown in a discussion group established to explore films shown by DEC.”[31]

For Richards the appeal of the Partisan group lay not only in their focus on rank and file union members but Partisan's attempts to push their events into union halls and other public spaces. The Trojan Horse coffee house in 'Greektown' was a favorite site – a gathering place for many of the city's Greek and Chilean exiles. In other words the goal was to leap beyond the usual middle-class exhibition venues. Richards and the others at DEC took this principle forward into all their subsequent film exhibition events, culminating in the much larger Colour Positive festival.[32]

DEC Fests included these:

- Film Forums 1975-76
- Cuban Film Festival, 1977
- Reel to Real I and II, 1979, 1980
- Colour Positive: Anti-Racism Film Festival, 1984



Cuban Film Festival poster. The festival drew large audiences and included many new refugees to Canada – from Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Peru, Bolivia, and Brazil.



Arthur Lamothe's passionate and artistically audacious *Le Mepris* (1969) showed the new militancy within Quebec's labor movement and its convergence with separatism. The film was suppressed the National Film Board, its funder, but picked up by DEC.



**Rosemary Donegan** arrived at DEC in February 1976 after working with the left-feminist book publisher, Women's Press, itself founded in 1972. Donegan recalls attending the previous year's DEC/TCLSAC screenings and feeling for the first time she was amidst "an intelligent, independent left community." On arrival at DEC she was immediately "thrown into the deep end" organizing special projects, the largest of which was DEC's 1977 Cuban Film Festival, held at Cinema Lumiere an art house on College Street. This was to be the largest public event yet organized by DEC and in preparation it entailed many attempts to secure the rights and import the films into the country. "The Cubans knew we really wanted those films," says Donegan. In this endeavor Gary Crowdus in New York was again a central facilitator. Based on their success with big-time theatrical showings in New York the Cubans signed on with high expectations, particularly for their 35 mm prestige films.

Although the Cubans expressed disappointment that the financial returns from the Toronto festival fell below what they had hoped, for DEC the publicity surrounding the event and the large enthusiastic audiences helped gain a higher profile in Toronto. Donegan recalls one significant facet of the festival audience – the large contingent of Chilean refugees, new to Toronto following the Pinochet military coup of 1973.[33] The screenings were packed and at one point Donegan, fearing a fire-marshall intervention, had to delay a screening until the enthusiastic, over-capacity crowds agreed to clear the aisles.

Other groups of refugees soon followed the Chileans, fleeing savage dictatorships in Argentina, Uruguay, Peru, and elsewhere. With the revolution in Nicaragua and the radical changes shaking Central and South America in the late 1970s, refugee and solidarity groups across the country increasingly looked to DEC to supply films that could explain and advance their cause in Canada.

On a more modest scale, Donegan spent considerable time creating slide-tape shows, such as *Who Pays, Who Profits: Food Production in Canada* (1976). This resource, which fed into the growing movement around food issues, such as the national People's Food Commission, proved immensely successful; the 1982 DEC catalogue claims that more than 500 copies of the slide show were sold. Much of this work benefitted from the collaboration with Rick Arnold, a veteran of leftist Popular Education. For Donegan, the slide shows often worked better than films in political education, due to the low-tech sense of immediacy of the slides and projector in the room.

By 1976 a number of DEC staff also felt guided by the Popular Education movements of the time, centered especially around the work of the Brazilian Paulo Freire. Freire, who had taught briefly in Toronto in 1976, emphasized what he termed critical pedagogy based on the economic and political contexts in which learning takes place.[34] Organizations such as the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) and its Canadian offshoot, the Participatory Research Group, served as vehicles for his ideas to be tested, especially among working-class immigrant communities.[35] Paulo Freire's class analysis of education remains a dynamic force in Brazil, hence the current attack on Freire's legacy from the right-wing Bolsonaro government, which came to power in 2019.

In 1978 Donegan assisted D'Arcy Martin and Anita Shilton, two other DEC staff, in producing *Starting From Nina: The Politics of Learning*. This half-hour, essay-style documentary, shot by the veteran cinematographer Martin Duckworth, proved to be DEC's sole foray into production, but one of the most financially successful works in the collection. Freire believed that education cannot be politically neutral and that critical reflection needs to be linked to action for broader social change. This concept, said the producers, "forms an integral part of the film," which focused on Toronto's newly arrived working-class Portuguese community.[36]

In the summer of 1977 DEC hired **Ferne Cristall** and from this point on the pace



Paulo Friere in *Starting From Nina* (Donegan, Martin, Shilton. Canada, 1977). The film explores key issues in adult popular education – one theoretical framework behind DEC's practice in the 70s and 80s. Freire taught that education cannot be politically neutral. It should lead to social change.



*Starting From Nina* provides a fascinating snapshot of Toronto's newly arrived Portuguese community in the 1970s, for example in this shot taken in Kensington Market

of film acquisitions and events increased dramatically. Cristall's first "assignments" centered on coalition building outside Toronto. In a recent conversation with Cristall she corrected my use of the word "assignments," emphasizing,

"At DEC collective meetings there was often discussion about participating in coalitions (sometimes I think we were asked.)"

Environmental and Indigenous activists fighting the proposed Mackenzie River Pipeline comprised one focus of her work. Another was immigrant women's organizations interested in screening *Starting From Nina* and other women's and labor films from the collection. This involved considerable traveling for Cristall across the Prairies and British Columbia, with a little side trip to the United States.

Cristall remembers that her first meeting at DEC Films involved a heated discussion about whether to take on a film from East Timor or JoAnn Elam's *Rape*.<sup>[37]</sup> At the time the group had money and energy for only one acquisition. Elam's work, based in Chicago, was a powerful, angry, and defiantly experimental piece of cinema that would take DEC Films in a new direction.<sup>[38]</sup> But of course the tragedy then unfolding in East Timor garnered little attention in the Western media and Canadian corporations had key operations in Indonesia. In the end DEC chose *Rape*, which Cristall believes was the correct decision. "A strong women's movement was eager for film emerging from the movement." That difficult political discussion made a strong impact on Cristall; she felt that the organization took its politics seriously and that there were consequences in decisions made about film distribution.

"For every film we got, we mapped out where it could be used and how we would distribute it."<sup>[39]</sup>

## Three key films

*The History Book* (Jannik Hastrup and Li Vilstrup, Denmark, 1973)



The rat says, "Elsewhere, greedy capitalists are hatching new schemes." *The History Book* (Hastrup and Vilstrup. Denmark, 1973). This remarkable series of nine films presents an animated, Marxist history of the world. DEC had funded the English translation of the series, in collaboration with the Tricontinental Film



Center, in New York.

*The History Book*, an avowedly Marxist nine-part series produced, somewhat surprisingly, for the Danish school system, quickly proved one of the most successful titles in the collection. The films in this series were, and remain when viewed today, very radical films, featuring narration such as “Elsewhere, greedy capitalists are hatching new schemes” and section headings such as “Africa gets syphilis, gin, guns, and Christianity.” The narrator throughout the series is a rat. Not perhaps till Kenny and Stan of *South Park* (Trey Parker and Matt Stone, 1997-) do we see such strongly satiric characters in Western animation. *The History Book* stands near the beginning of a long and distinguished career for creator Jannik Hastrup, now considered one of the top animation artists in the world and one whose work, still based in Denmark, has been consistently socialist. He continues to create strong and innovative films, often dealing with racism.



The rat narrator (center-right) listens in as the slave-hunters hatch their schemes.



The films employ a rich visual mixture, often using loose water-colour backgrounds and sometimes elegant, sometimes deliberately crude human figures.

DEC acquired the Canadian rights to this series again through the contacts of André Pâquet in Montreal. In turn, they convinced Tricontinental in New York to invest with them in the English translation, resulting in a rat narrator who speaks with a Brooklyn accent! Along with the humor of a rat narrator, the ideas in each film are clearly laid out and the focus is on analysis. However, the late John Hess, co-editor of *Jump Cut*, in a largely positive, typically perceptive review of the films pointed to one blind spot with the later works in the series. The problem involves the filmmakers’ advocacy of

“an uncritical third worldism. The position that the third world liberation struggles are the center of, the heart of, the cutting edge of ‘The Revolution’ distorts Marxism’s demand for an internationalist perspective and often leads to the uncritical support of nationalist bourgeois elements in these countries.”[40]

Part Four of the series, titled *Bloody Schemes*, on slavery, exemplifies the radical politics at the heart of the films set in an experimental, formally inventive style. The film is visually rich, using a mix of loose water-colour backgrounds and sometimes elegant, sometimes deliberately crude human figures. Hastrup often works with cut-out animation (like that of *Monty Python* and *South Park*) but other drawings and panels create a smoother combination of line and movement. Still other scenes move toward abstraction and expressionism or cut in historical



Images of abstraction try to capture the feeling of terror in the lives of the slaves.



Raymundo Gleyzer's *Mexico: A Frozen Revolution* (1972) was the most widely used of the first films in the DEC collection. It showed across the country in schools, libraries, university classes, and community groups.

drawings.

The sound track contributes an equally rich and complex undertow, combining solo voices and instruments with moments of blues-inspired song. We often hear unrecognizable noises perhaps generated from grating, clanging wood or metal and distorted human moans and cries. Near the end a rapid visual montage in the style of Cuba's Santiago Alvarez, for example in his *LBJ* (1967), cuts together photos of U.S. photojournalism in order to illustrate the ongoing legacy of racism and African American resistance. This montage works in harmony with the avant-garde jazz of Yusef Lateef – images at times cut precisely to the musical rhythms and at other moments jostling in syncopation. In light of today's growing interest in animated documentary *The History Book* stands out as a particularly fine example of radical art.[41]

### *Mexico, the Frozen Revolution* (Raymundo Gleyzer, Argentina, 1971)

Raymundo Gleyzer of Argentina (b. 1941) was a co-founder of Cine de la Base, a group that proclaimed its dedication to revolutionary films. *Mexico the Frozen Revolution*, his best known work, mixes newsreel footage of Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, interviews and testimony shot, often clandestinely, for the film, observational footage of the Presidential campaign of 1970, featuring Luis Echeverría, the eventual winner, and a broad range of other visual material, including art work and scenes from fictional films.

Humberto Rios, another Argentinian film veteran, also handled the cinematography with another camera and Jauna Sapire recorded sound. A strong Voice of God – male, educated, at turns sad, and angry, sarcastic, and didactic prevails throughout. This is Bill Nichols' full-blown expository mode but without the pseudo-objectivity. The strongly worded thesis argues that Mexico's legitimate attempt at full-scale revolution in the years 1910-1919, was betrayed and "frozen" by the 1919 Carranza government and his land-owning allies. Land reform was swept off the table. The film shows very effectively that forty years after Carranza the indigenous peasants, especially in the southern state of Chiapas, continue to live in dire poverty in a "feudal slave society." Any knowledgeable viewer seeing the film today will be struck with the ongoing tragedy; after another fifty years, the situation in Chiapas remains mostly the same.

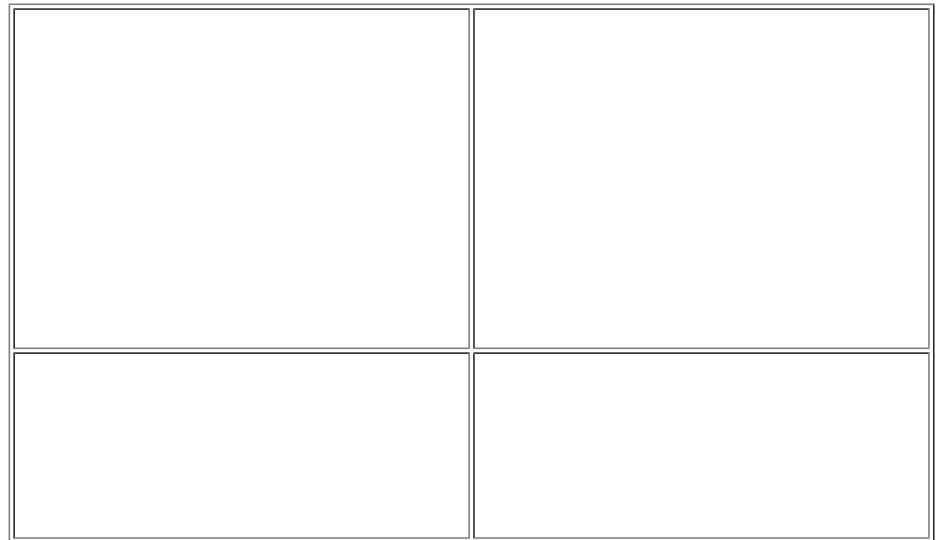


"He would never steal an image [of someone he wanted to film]." The Argentinian filmmakers had to keep a low profile when shooting scenes with the Indigenous peasants in the Mexican countryside.

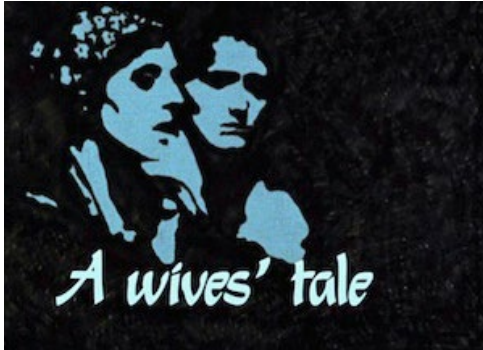


Raymundo Gleyzer and Juana Sapire interview Mexican Presidential candidate Luis Echeverría during the 1970 campaign.

In 1976, Gleyzer was kidnapped, tortured, and murdered by a paramilitary group operating within Argentina's military dictatorship. But his films still draw admirers and prompt important debates. Juana Sapire, Gleyzer's wife, film collaborator, and biographer continues to tell this story and has produced new



digital versions of their most important works. Thus, for example, in 2017, the “10th Subversive Film Festival” held in Zagreb, Croatia, included a 10 film retrospective of Gleyzer’s work.[42] Sapire has also produced the documentary *Raymundo* (Ernesto Ardito and Virna Molina, 2003), which includes important details on the film’s creation and numerous production stills. *Raymundo* can be found on Vimeo).[43]



*A Wives Tale* (Bissonnette, Rock, Duckworth, Canada, 1980) was shot on location in Sudbury, Ontario, center of operations for the International Nickel Corporation (INCO) and home to a sizeable Francophone community. The strike was huge – involving more than 11,000 members of the United Steelworkers of America, Local 6500. The Wives Supporting the Strike Committee played a key role in holding the strikers together through to their eventual victory.

*A Wives Tale* (Sophie Bissonnette, Martin Duckworth, Joyce Rock, Quebec, 1980)

On September 15, 1978, 11,700 mine and smelter workers, local 6500 of the United Steelworkers of America, voted to strike against the International Nickel Company of Canada (Inco.), and for the following eight and one-half months the city of Sudbury, Ontario, became the site of a significant labor struggle — one of the most important since the Second World War.

At the same time the bitter events in Sudbury proved significant for many of the women in the city, since they had played a large role in the eventual victory by organizing a militant support group known as the Wives Supporting the Strike Committee. Their efforts shed new light on the role women have historically played in times of labor conflict. Joyce Rock emphasized that the strike itself and the relations between the men and women involved daunting complexities and contradictions:

“The women insisted that we film their conflicts as well as the good moments: the difficulties of organizing, of getting together, of learning about and trusting each other specifically as women that were new to them.”

The filmmakers operated with two slogans:

- "A different cinema ... why hesitate to name it? It is a militant film, a feminist film, a tale of women."
- "A Québécois film, still and always an act of faith."

This second principle indicates a striking feature of the film’s production. Although it is set in Ontario, three of the filmmakers came from Quebec (Duckworth hailed from Newfoundland). They were drawn together to make the



film for two reasons. First, this was a massive, significant strike that inspired solidarity across the country. Second, the Sudbury region is home to a significant community of Francophone Ontarians. The three directors and their veteran producer, Arthur Lamothe, emerged from the militant working-class culture and cinema of 1970s Quebec.[44] This crystalized in the unique Québécois style of Cinema Direct, consciously different, since the late 1950s, from the French Cinema Vérité of Jean Rouch and the more “purely” observational U.S. Direct Cinema of Pennebaker et al.. Cinema Direct emphasized the connections between filmmakers and their francophone subjects (and audience).



“As the women became increasingly involved in the strike they questioned more and more their traditional supportive role. This provoked many heated discussions among women and obviously not without upsetting husband, family, union – and company,”  
Joyce Rock

Barbara Martineau wrote passionately and perceptively about the film:

“Unlike most Québec militant films and unlike most labor-oriented documentaries made in English in Canada and elsewhere, *A Wives Tale* is pre-eminently, self-consciously, happily, and proudly a feminist film, insisting on the priority of women's experience and women's wide-ranging voices and visions as its perspective on the strike.”[45]



Sophie Bissonnette (left) at the Steenbeck, 1983.

For Glen Richards *A Wives Tale* was the most important film project for DEC up to that time. Several staff, including Richards, threw themselves into helping the filmmakers plan the film and fundraising for a national exhibition campaign. The goal was to work as closely as possible with sympathetic labor groups in a variety of towns and cities, starting in Sudbury. In the end the national tour was successful both for the film and its directors but also for DEC's reputation as an advocate for progressive labor. In particular the campaign pushed for the rights of working women within the labor movement.[46]

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Selecting films for distribution



*In the Jungle There is Much To Do* (Walter Tournier, Experimental Film Group, Uruguay, 1972). Unable to explain his situation because of censorship the prisoner writes of animals in the jungle. A hunter captures the animals and takes them to a zoo. There they are befriended by a little girl who sympathizes with them and comes to their aid. An allegory of the nature of repressive regimes.



Ontario's Union of Injured Workers demonstrated on a regular basis in front of the legislature starting in the 1970s. Clarke Mackey's *A Right To Live* documents that struggle. ...



... The film was produced, says Mackey, "with the

What made for a "good" DEC Film? DEC's criteria in its search for films to bring into the collection usually focused on five features.

- The film should take a clear independent left stance on the issues it was exploring;
- it should be useful for contemporary political education;
- it should demonstrate some quality of content, form, and technique;
- it should promise some commercial potential; and
- it should make a contribution to DEC's overall collection.

Chuck Kleinhans' 1983 manifesto for radical documentary encapsulates the DEC Films approach. In it he argues for a criticism that considers "forms, politics, makers, and contexts," and provides a specific guide to analysis of left-wing use value in film.<sup>[47]</sup> [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Radical documentary, wrote Kleinhans, often provides witness and affects its viewers. But, films should also interpret and analyze. And further, films should

"... teach people how to analyze things themselves in order to give them more power to act in their own future."

For DEC if a work was a good quality, left-leaning film, that was not enough. The work had to be considered in the contexts of Canadian politics and Canadian audiences. How important was the film in the local situation? What would be most useful for particular audiences working around specific issues? For DEC the arguments for or against distribution seldom focused on the filmmakers, but on the audience. This type of thinking found expression in Kleinhans' manifesto:

"All too often films and tapes are made primarily for reasons of [the filmmaker's] individual commitment and are not accompanied by other, more complex political reasoning."

Many films, even those clearly left-wing, got rejected for a variety of political and practical reasons. Some were too narrow politically; some exhibited what DEC perceived as political problems (poor representation of women, racial or ethnic groups, etc.). Political narrowness could take several forms. Many films sponsored by trade unions focused solely on their members or a specific campaign, and they sometimes displayed open hostility to other unions. Because DEC hoped that unions would become supporters of their work, it could be difficult to turn down a production made by a potential ally. Other films betrayed a party line developed by specific left fractions, such as the various Trotskyist, Maoist, or Soviet-oriented groups active in the 70s. The presence of a "party line" within a film did not, however, lead to automatic rejection. In some cases DEC was simply unaware of the specific party politics of the producers. A few films, good in many respects, nevertheless got rejected because their producers worked within a religious organization and couldn't separate their goals of social justice from proselytizing.

Dozens of films on important social issues, with communities thirsting to use them, turned out to be appallingly dull or so amateurish as to be counter-productive. These works were especially difficult to reject if they had emerged from a marginal community eager to make its case to a broad public. A few films were deemed too graphically violent for a general audience – a later example of this appeared in films produced during the 1982 war in Lebanon showing the



involvement of injured workers in every stage of the production."



John Heartfield, *Photomonteur* and Anand Patwardhan's *Prisoners of Conscience* exemplified the sophisticated work in documentary produced in Europe and India directed to a well-educated audience steeped in politics and history.



*Prisoners of Conscience*. "The overall effect is neither shrill nor strident. In fact the power of the film derives from its restraint. Restraint does not however imply a reluctance to state facts. The film does that only too clearly." A. Kagal, *The Times of India*

results of the Sabra and Shatila refugee camp massacres of Palestinian refugees. Regardless of the documentary value in such emergency room footage, DEC concluded that there would be no hope in finding a general Canadian audience for such material.

For most members of the DEC Films group, the contradiction between organizing with communities for social change and the power that came from selecting a limited number of works for general distribution could be quite uncomfortable. The group had become gatekeepers and thus acquired cultural and political capital. This meant the ability to decide not only what films to take on or what filmmakers to support, but what issues would get support and attention. The veteran programmer and analyst of film curation, Liz Czach, believes that this process forms part of the "affective" labor of curation. She emphasizes that along with the privilege of making selections comes the attendant discomfort of constantly rejecting films and their makers.[48]

Many of these contradictions around the power and responsibility inherent in film distribution (particularly with works from the Third World or historically marginalized communities) had been hotly debated at the 1974 *Rencontres* in Montreal. The biggest complaints there focused on financial arrangements. This reflected to some degree the international status of the filmmakers present (such as Med Hondo of Mauritania and Miguel Littin of Chile). Lessor known directors undoubtedly would have put forward more complaints about the processes (and favoritism?) at work in selection for distribution.

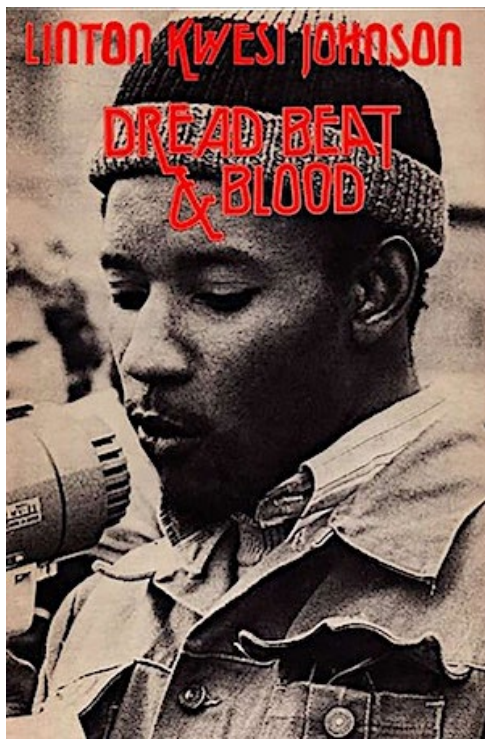
DEC rejected some films because the maker, usually a journalist, seemed too prominent on-screen. Films that placed undue emphasis on the heroic role of capturing dramatic footage or on sensational tactics in gaining access to difficult sources were turned down. Films that thrust the filmmaker ahead of the issues or the people being depicted were labeled self-indulgent. There were plenty of those. The "heroic film and photo journalist mold" seen then bears little relation to the later trend toward self-reflexive cinema, in which the filmmaker is considered to be more honest by revealing their point-of-view. It's also different from the original, more reflective Cinema Vérité as practiced by Jean Rouch in the 1960s.[49]

In this regard, the critical opprobrium of 'self-indulgence' was much bandied about by media radicals in the 1970s. It could function, however, adversely in DEC and elsewhere as a brake on the appreciation of innovative or experimental media. Part of this kind of evaluation carried over from the old left's distrust of bourgeois art; part of it was a perceived need to distance one's political work from the anything-goes atmosphere of the counter-culture. At the same time these debates about appropriate forms for effective political film were genuine and necessary. The purpose of political film centered on its effectiveness, specifically its use value for non-specialist audiences – work that roamed too far into experimental territory took big risks. "In those days we were wary of films we considered too arty," says Donegan.

## Forms that challenge the 'watery stew'

I would not say that DEC's films lacked challenging formal strategies. Compared to TV journalism, commercial newsreels, or mainstream educational docs, most of the early DEC films stood defiantly as anti-commercial and anti-entertainment.

Many of the works from South and Central America in particular explored a wide range of experimental forms. One that used innovative animation for political effect was the children's film *In the Jungle There is Much To Do* (Walter Tournier, Experimental Film Group, Uruguay, 1972).[50] Tournier was inspired by an illustrated letter from a Uruguayan prisoner to his daughter, using the allegory of animals captured in a zoo. DEC produced the English-language version and commissioned a separate sound-track, from well-known musicians David de



Franco Rosso's *Dread Beat An' Blood* (UK, 1978) featuring Linton Kwesi Johnson proved a favorite in the DEC collection and helped inspire Toronto's explosive dub poetry scene of the late 70s led by Lillian Allen, Clifton Joseph, and Devon Haughton.



Lorraine Gray's *With Babies and Banners* (US, 1978) along with other finely crafted U.S. labor docs – *Union Maids* (Klein, Mogulescu, Reichart, 1977), *On the Line* (Margolis, 1977), *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* (Connie Field, 1980), and *The Wobblies* (Bird and Shaffer, 1979) attracted more mainstream media attention for DEC and supported feminist activists in the labor movement.

Launay and Billy Bryans, featuring rhythms and sounds of Blues, Rock, and Country, familiar to a Canadian audience.

This experimental approach flowed from a broad tradition, led by the example of the Cubans, especially Santiago Alvarez, and the Argentinian pioneer Fernando Birri. Cubans also made the theoretical case for this work in such influential essays as Julio Garcia Espinosa's "For an Imperfect Cinema."<sup>[51]</sup> As Julianne Burton argued in her eloquent 1986 book "*Cinema and Social Change in Latin America*" these filmmakers led the way in combining innovative forms and radical analysis of society. In another essay Burton stated:

"Latin American filmmakers constantly forced the expansion of the concept of documentary by favoring investigation over exposition, hypothesis over prescription, 'process' over 'analysis,' poeticized over 'purely' factual discourse."<sup>[52]</sup>

The New Latin American cinema valorized by Espinosa became influential among political filmmakers across the world, for example, in India through the work of Anand Patwardhan.<sup>[53]</sup>

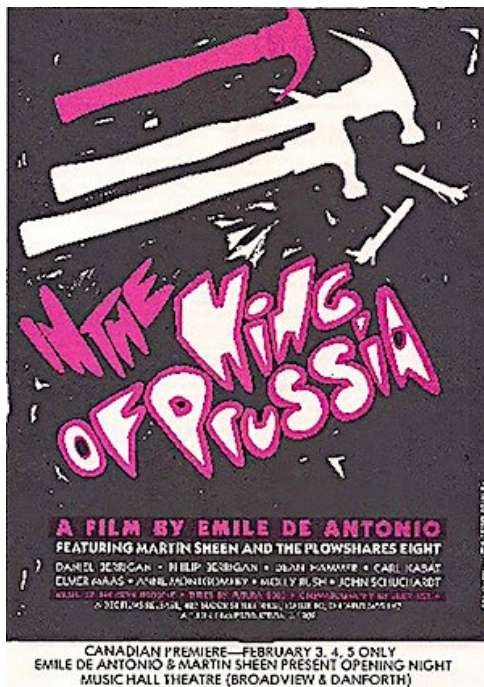
DEC also championed films that sought more participatory production methods. One good Canadian example was Clarke Mackey's *A Right to Live* (1977), which had begun as an experiment in community access filmmaking. The film centers on an organization of injured workers and their uphill fights to improve job safety. It was produced, says Mackey, "with the involvement of injured workers in every stage of the production."

Another challenging quality of the films lay in their intellectual content and the serious discourse around international political issues. Many of the 70s films were pitched to a high level of education (particularly those made outside North America). They made assumptions about viewers' knowledge and demands on audience abilities to absorb startling new facts and difficult concepts. Works such as Patwardhan's *Prisoners of Conscience* (India, 1977) and Helmut Herbst's, *John Heartfield, Photomonteur* (Germany, 1976) required a well-informed and attentive audience to keep up. In addition, many of the films raged with open anger and set out to challenge their audiences. Jonathan Forbes recalls that his first viewing of Frank Diamond's *El Salvador: Revolution or Death* (1980), was for him a profoundly disturbing experience. This was long before filmmakers, under pressure from broadcast-TV funders, insisted that all documentaries should involve 'story-telling.'

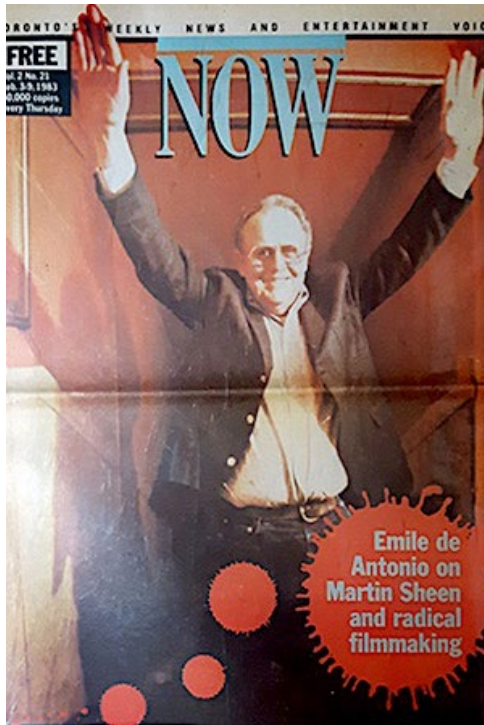
News and archival footage that broadcasters would have considered of poor visual quality, or material shot in the street or in hidden locations, routinely appear in the DEC documentaries of the 70s. The same rough quality applied to sound recording, music tracks, and graphics. Some of this could be rationalized by low budgets or the clandestine nature of the shooting. Sometimes the poor quality reflected the scanty experience of the filmmakers, getting their hands on equipment for the first time. Coincidentally, however a strong aesthetic of non-commercialism accompanied vast swaths of cultural work in the 60s and 70s in everything from alternative comix to 'artist-made' films in 16mm and 8mm, to the music worlds of punk, garage, and early hip hop.

DEC never saw the films *primarily* as either works of art or commercial goods. Of course, even mainstream educational distributors, such as Canada's McIntyre Media, see their film collections as content based. Nevertheless, for DEC the films were meant to provoke discussion and in a small way to change the world. This is what set the organization apart from most other distributors. The ideal was always to show the films in settings where discussion could take place; a union hall, a church basement, a library or school auditorium usually worked better than a commercial theatre. Unlike commercial or art-house distributors, the subject





De Antonio's *In the King of Prussia*, 1982. Featuring Martin Sheen. Poster by Pat Jeffries for the Canadian premiere in Toronto



'De' gets his cover on NOW magazine.

matter not the filmmaker held center stage.

Yet, in some cases this lack of attention to filmmakers was clearly off-balance, even unfair. A more 'auteurist' approach that emphasized the extraordinary filmmaking skills and courage of Miguel Littin from Chile, clearly evident in *The Jackal of Nahueltoro*, or Frank Diamond's El Salvador films would have been appropriate and would hardly have hindered the political discussion.

In the early 1980s more attention began to be paid to the filmmakers, certainly with the acquisition of the Emile De Antonio films in 1983. "De" and his wife at the time, a New York psychiatrist, demanded star treatment for him and he got it. De Antonio was also correct to insist that his work was pioneering and unique. It didn't hurt that DEC's first (ad)venture with De Antonio involved Martin Sheen for the Canadian premiere of *In the King of Prussia* (1983). In public "De" played the role of the gruff New Yorker, while Sheen usually performed as the soft-spoken Hollywood charmer. But Sheen also revealed a tougher side. At the well-attended Toronto press conference when reporters cynically challenged the politics of their film, Sheen fought back with a forcefulness and passion that startled the assembled media representatives.

DEC's launch of the De Antonio films in Canada marked the first time the group managed to snag a coveted cover in Toronto's alternative weekly, *NOW*. Although *NOW* promoted itself in the fashion of New York's *Village Voice* or the *Chicago Reader* with a mix of counter-culture and left-leaning politics, its film reviewer was proudly apolitical and fashioned himself in the mold of Pauline Kael. *NOW* was thus a dead-end for DEC promotions. Vancouver's *Georgia Straight* and Toronto's *Clarion* always proved more sympathetic.

Apart from the 1974 TCLSAC screening that attracted the Western Guard, the only time that DEC experienced a violent response to its films centered on De Antonio. On the night before a showing of *In the King of Prussia*, the film screen at DEC's new exhibition hall in Toronto was slashed in a large zig-zag pattern. And at an earlier De Antonio screening, in 1977 for *In the Year of the Pig*, this time at Queen's University, Bill Nichols recalls that the theater screen was "severely slashed."

The DEC Films catalogues for the 1970s and early 80s naturally reflect the biases of its staff. The range of films certainly do not conform to what Brian Winston refers to as the "received history" of documentary practice.[54] Winston reminds us of the 1970s vogue for the various forms of observational documentary, dominated by the U.S. style of Direct Cinema, but also found in milder (or more nuanced?) form in the NFB's *Candid Eye* series. He is right to point out that documentary scholars in the UK and the US had by the early 80s voiced serious reservations about the ideology of Direct Cinema. However, leftist critiques of the form had been voiced from the beginning, especially in Quebec. Even in the United States, there were plenty of voices, De Antonio loudest among them, who slammed the naturalism and empiricism of Drew, Pennebaker, Wiseman et al. For De Antonio, Direct Cinema produced "a watery stew" and "a childish assumption about the nature of film" that cloaked the filmmaker's political biases behind the supposedly unmediated gaze of the camera."[55]

The films distributed by DEC fell either into the older, more didactic, expository mode or, as sketched above in the South American work, mixed voices and forms of address that encouraged viewers to analyze and not simply observe. Some Canadian and Quebec films were not shy about formal experimentation. *Sarah's War* (1974) by Recha Jungmann and Lothar Spree[56] used what DEC described as "an imaginative model of Brechtian" techniques in which Sarah "goes to war with our present Canadian economic system by shoplifting, bank robbery and



prostitution.” Sylvie Groulx and Francine Allaire’s *The Clean Sweep* (1974) explores young men’s attitudes to women using a mix of dramatized readings, interviews, and much street photography to create a “cinematic collage” in a style “reminiscent of the French New Wave” – Agnes Varda’s *L’Opéra Mouffe* perhaps? In fact, few of the women’s films in DEC’s late 1970s catalogues employ the conventional forms of TV documentary, what Kleinhans referred to as a comfortable formalism – “the Lawrence Welk approach.”

By the late 1970s DEC saw its films as part of a ‘collection;’ a group of works meant to be considered as a whole – a curated grouping seen to be making a statement. For this reason acquisition of new titles had to contribute to an acceptable balance. This was true for film styles and genres as well as for subject matter. Thus the collection grew to include fiction, animation, and more experimental works. Occasionally a weaker film was taken on to fill a gap in the collection but usually good work from all parts of the world and covering many struggles could be found through research and a broader range of contacts.

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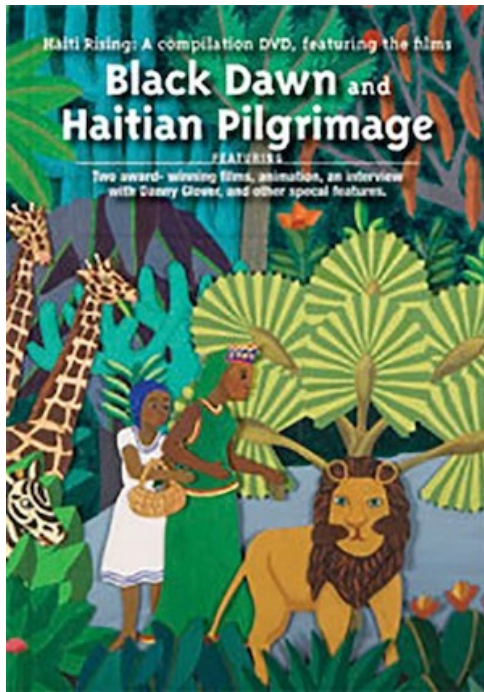


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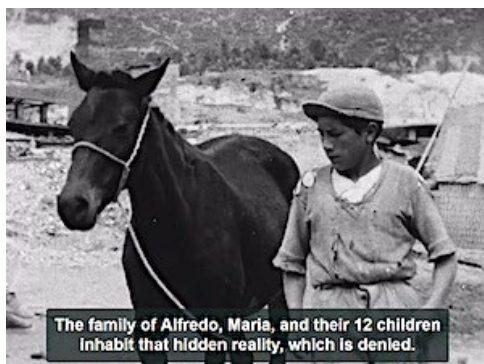
# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## An international network



*Black Dawn*, created by Robin Lloyd and Doreen Kraft tells the history of Haiti through the animated paintings of thirteen of the country's finest artists. This beautiful film introduced Haiti to thousands of Canadian viewers. Another fine example of an unusual documentary using political animation.



*The Brickmakers*. This famous, extraordinary work of non-fiction benefits greatly from Rodriguez and Silva's many years of filming in the peasant communities outside Bogota. The film mixes hard-headed Marxist sociology with sequences that could have been shot by Buñuel for *Las Hurdes* (Spain, 1933) or *Los Olvidados* (Mexico, 1950).

DEC's first films came from the Tricontinental Film Center in New York.[57] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Tricontinental was a business as much as a political project, says Glen Richards, and DEC had money to spend, which the New Yorkers gladly welcomed.[58] According to Richards, DEC was also able to convince Tricon to invest in translation, especially for *The History Book*. Some of the key films acquired in this fashion in addition to the work of Littin, Gleyzer, and Rios, included *The Tupamaros* (Jan Lindqvist, Sweden, 1974), *The Brickmakers* (Martha Rodriguez and Jorge Silva, Colombia, 1972),[59] and *Black Dawn* (Robin Lloyd and Doreen Kraft, Haiti, 1979).

Other distributors who supplied DEC functioned as a loose international network of like-minded cinema activists, and included:

- The Other Cinema, London (1970-1977), source for *The Miners Film*, etc. [60]
- Contemporary Films, London (1951- present). The oldest independent film distributor in the U.K., source for *The Dispossessed*. [61]
- Third World Newsreel, New York (1971 – present), source for *The Woman's Film*. [62]
- California Newsreel San Francisco (1968 – present) source for *Controlling Interest*, etc.
- Women Make Movies, New York (1972 – present)
- Icarus Films, New York (1978 – present)
- Cinema Guild, New York (1981-present)
- Films Transit, Montreal (1982 – present) [63]

In addition, many independent filmmakers, as well as leftist film collectives, in Germany, France, Scandinavia, and Japan approached DEC on their own or through a recommendation from another distributor or filmmaker.

Another source of information came from coverage in international print sources. The magazines *Jump Cut*, *Cineaste*, and *Women and Film* provided reviews and analysis of new important work. *Jump Cut's* editors in particular (John Hess, Julia Lesage, and Chuck Kleinhans) showed an unusually keen and knowledgeable interest in Canadian and Quebec politics. The New York-based *Guardian* newspaper and London's *Time Out* also published timely reviews but more importantly coverage of innovative film showings and the political or community groups who organized the screenings. Gary Crowds in New York, so helpful to Kae Elgie in 1973, continued as a long-time source of films, ideas, and moral support for DEC, first at Tricon, then through Cinema Guild distribution, and as the founder of *Cineaste*.

A much more unusual source of film prints arrived one night as an anonymous donation, most likely from a political group in Kingston, Ontario, which had over several years acquired many prints from the Newsreel collectives in the United States. Most of these were U.S. Newsreel films, but several were Cuban. The most impressive was the Santiago Alvarez tour de force, *Hanoi, Tuesday, March 13* (Cuba, 1967). One Alvarez film from the cache proved especially popular. This was *Now* (1965), on the U.S. Civil Rights movement, featuring Lena Horne singing the title song, a work that had been blackballed by U.S. radio. Although all the footage in *Now* was shot by U.S. TV and newsreel companies, which had somehow made its way to Cuba, some of it recording the Watts uprisings of 1965, most of it had

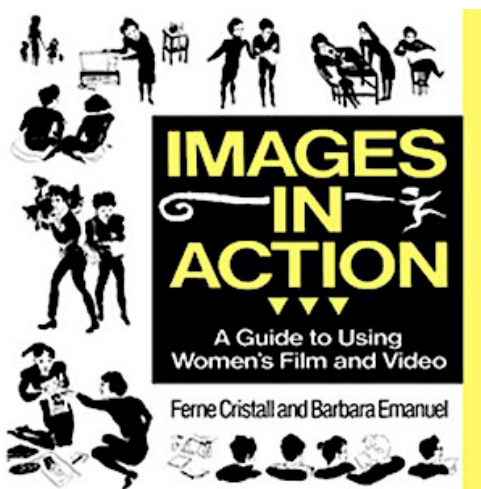
never played on U.S. screens. Michael Chanan, in his indispensable book, *The Cuban Image*, describes the film's tone as one of "skeptical irony." To my ears, however, it's white hot rage. The DEC print was later "lost" by a visiting U.S. professor at McGill University, widely believed to be an FBI agent working undercover in Canada. Obviously some authorities agreed with DEC: this was an important, radical film.

## Finding an audience / building an audience

Throughout the 1970s and beyond, audiences for the films grew to be quite large, in screenings across the country. Some public shows involved hundreds of spectators, other times the venues were tiny, with crowds to match. For most of its twenty years a DEC film would be showing every day of the year. The biggest users of the films were NGOs such as churches, unions, and political groups. Equally important were the high schools, colleges, and universities, who rented or purchased the films primarily for classes in Politics, Sociology, and History. Other teachers of Women's, Indigenous, and Labour Studies, International Affairs, and Economics became regular users. A history professor at Kingston's Royal Military College tried on several occasions to rent films on guerrilla movements, such as *The Tupamaros*. He was ignored.

One key group in the 1970s centered on the Anti-Apartheid movement. As Glen Richards remembers, the 1975 TCLSAC series "showed many of our films for the first time in Canada. Then word spread that we had films. In a sense, the network built itself." [64]

In addition, as the academic discipline of Film Studies began to take shape in Canada, first at Queen's University, in Kingston, documentary scholars such as Bill Nichols, Jacqueline Levitin, Zuzana Pick, and Tom Waugh, became strong advocates of the DEC Films collection. (I first became aware of DEC Films in Nichols's documentary class at Queen's in 1975, when he invited Glen Richards and others from DEC to present their ideas). This in turn prompted DEC to think more about the value of basic film education and not simply education through film. One concrete example of DEC's film education efforts centered on encouraging community groups to get more out of their film showings. In other words, take better advantage of what a film could offer. This culminated in the guidebook, *Images in Action, A Guide to Using Women's Film and Video*, written by Cristall and Barbara Emanuel, another veteran staff member at DEC. [65] The book gathered many of DEC's ideas and principles of activist distribution and attempted, in part, to encourage others to follow the DEC model.



*Images in Action*, by Ferne Cristall and Barbara Emanuel, with illustrations by Gail Geltner (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1986). The book gathered many of DEC's ideas and principles of activist distribution. It also created an exemplary mix of theory and practice and in its blend of images and text reflected DEC's strong links to popular education, including popular film education.





The book's design pre-figures what today would be termed "graphic non-fiction." Its unusual, square design format also suggested a work-book, rather than an academic monograph.

It also created an exemplary mix of theory and practice and in its blend of images and text reflected DEC's strong links to popular education. The book centers on an argument for the use of film in the women's movement:

"It is becoming more and more apparent that women organizing showings of women's culture is one way of taking control over our lives and developing pride in our achievements, awareness of histories, our futures, and our present situations." [66]

Activist librarians within university, high school, and public libraries formed a third important group of allies in the project of screening political films to general Canadian audiences. Each year librarians would rent, purchase, and actively program hundreds of DEC Films. Kathy Elder, for example, became an exceptionally knowledgeable ally at York University, and played a key role through her strong national influence within libraries. Politically this was quite strategic because for most Canadians the library serves as a safe, neutral space for both individual learning and community building. A screening in a library gave any film stature and status — a credibility and worthiness that could help the work find a broader audience. There wasn't one film in the DEC collection, no matter how unusual artistically or radical politically, that wasn't screened by an enthusiastic librarian.

Throughout the 70s and 80s, following the massive expansion of Canadian universities and colleges in the 60s, educational budgets for schools and libraries soared well beyond levels of previous decades. Starting in 1981 DEC played an active role in the Ontario and Western Canada Film Showcases. These trade shows provided a sober reminder of how well organized and successful were their



Reel to Real Festival, 1980. The phrase “reel to real” emphasized film as an activist tool in the real world. One highlight of the festival was the live music component to most of the screenings.



*Some Black Women*, by Claire Prieto and Roger McTair (1976) was the first independent film made by Black Canadians. For more on the filmmakers see my early interview with them in *Brink of Reality: New Canadian Film and Video* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1994).

mainstream competitors. However, DEC also discovered how thirsty were radical librarians for what DEC had to offer. Even after the Mulroney Conservatives took power federally in 1983 provincial education budgets remained healthy. This is an important part of the story.

TV broadcasts never comprised an option for DEC before the mid-1980s. Even when the films were deemed to be “broadcast quality,” programmers in these years at the CBC rejected all attempts to have them aired. One senior buyer lectured me as to the standard CBC outlook: “If there is something happening internationally we will send our crews to cover it.” This in stark terms shows a bias that works to exclude different points of view, under cover of Canadian nationalism. Most CBC buyers also alleged that Canadian viewers could not handle sub-titles.

Within DEC many debates focused on the effectiveness of various exhibition strategies. Was a large audience for a single-showing, TV broadcast preferable to small-scale showings co-sponsored with groups who could use a film for specific purposes?

“A good speaker [accompanying a film] in the right setting can draw specific connections for Canadian users. Our role as distributors makes us facilitators as well.” [67]

In later years DEC became marginally more successful in selling its films to the new, smaller Canadian broadcasters and renting to commercial theatres. This however was never seen as a substitute for screenings arranged for and with activist groups.

A key element of political film exhibition in these years came with the understanding that the films would be seen in groups. Rental and sale prices prohibited most individual buyers, along with the pricey and bulky projectors. This changed radically in the mid-1980s when lower priced VHS cassettes came to dominate the non-theatrical market. However, what was gained in terms of accessibility because of price and ease of showing was accompanied by a loss of public community-based political discussion and the opportunity for film education.

## Business disrupted

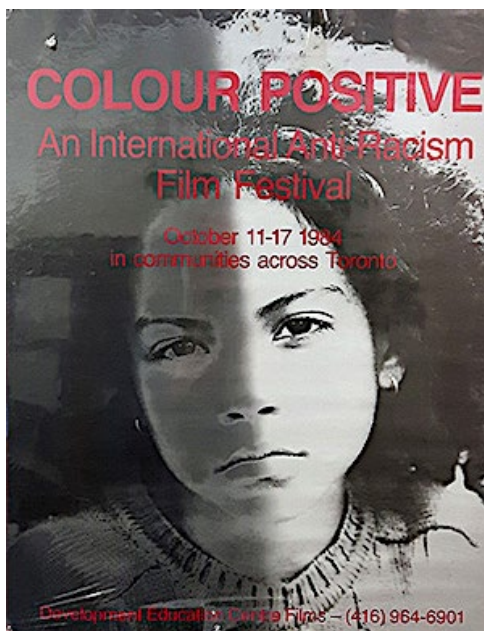
In 1979 DEC could sell a 30-minute 16mm print to a Canadian school, library, or



*Some Black Women* concentrates on the lives of working-class women and includes many sequences filmed in Toronto's downtown textile factories around Spadina Avenue. The film makes a soft-spoken plea for unity among the various Black communities and nationalities, some in Canada for generations, others newly arrived from the Caribbean.



Kimberly Safford and Fred Barney Taylor's *Children of Sandino* (US, 1982) exemplified the melding of documentary and experimental traditions – the new cinema that DEC sought.



union for \$600. The business was healthy, relying only to a small degree on government grants, and creating surpluses that were plowed back into DEC's other endeavors, such as the book store and radio programs. Throughout the 70s DEC Films relied on grants for only about 10% of its operating budgets. These came from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the Canada Council for the Arts. The relationships with these funders might best be described as tenuous, at times characterized by political cat and mouse. CIDA wanted DEC to promote the largesse of Canadian development projects abroad; the agency's bureaucrats would have been hard pressed however to find any such resource in DEC's catalogs. In fact, DEC lost all its CIDA funding for a time after publication of two provocatively-titled books, *Perpetuating Poverty* (Robert Carty and Virginia Smith, 1981) and *Ties That Bind* (Robert Clarke and Richard Swift, eds., 1982), which directly challenged the practices of Canadian foreign aid.

By the mid-80s however, the new video technologies were, in today's parlance, proving "disruptive." Customers could now purchase a 30 minute  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch or  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch video for \$100. Of course, cheaper rental and sales prices made for a broader range of potential purchasers. Now a union local could purchase on their own without relying on their regional or national education department.

Nevertheless, during the 1980s the market for 16mm sales disappeared seemingly overnight. Although the rental market for 16mm held on until the early 1990s, this situation became a real challenge for DEC Films and was certainly one of the factors in its mid-1990s demise.

## The politics of distribution

Although one or two staff members had flirted with organized left parties, none were members during their years at DEC. The atmosphere in the group steered clear of party-building. In the first years especially, staff believed that left parties and the existing labor unions were not well-educated about the Third World or the racial issues taken up in the films. Many in the larger DEC collective (as well as many of the filmmakers) saw themselves more as independent journalists or educators and thus, for better or worse, wished to hold themselves apart from organized left movements. This applied more to some of the men than the women of DEC, who had no problems identifying with the rapidly growing women's movement. In fact, most of the DEC collective used the term "independent left" rather than New Left. For some the label New Left had become corrupted by the dominant media, as too closely connected with an apolitical counter-culture.

Of course, strong debates and conflicts often flared up over specific political issues, campaigns, philosophies, and trends. These included analysis of the Soviet Union, China and its Cultural Revolution, Cuba, and the prospects for radical change in South America. Closer to home, in the early 1970s the main topic for debate revolved around the hopes for Quebec independence. In those years the tumult within the left in Quebec seemed much in advance of "English" Canada. The power of Quebec's unions, especially strong in the early 70s, and the exuberance of its political cinema proved inspiring.

Another political strain centered on Canadian nationalism and the degree to which this broad movement could be harnessed by the left. In the late 60s and early 1970s these debates exploded in the left caucuses of the NDP and most



Colour Positive: An International Anti-Racism Film Festival (1984) was the most ambitious, and successful event in DEC Films' first decade. It featured more than fifty films and screened in fifteen venues across the city. The festival booklet stated its rationale plainly. "Why This Festival. Racism is increasingly being recognized as an issue in Canada and scores of 'multi-cultural' events are now staged each year as some sort of antidote. The trouble with these is that most people couldn't care less what their neighbours eat or wear in the first place. Racism is far more often a matter of jobs, education, immigration policy, access to services, cultural and land claim rights and the threat of violence on the street, than it is an unfamiliarity with 'specialty' foods!" Poster design by Stephanie Martin



DEC Films Mini Catalog, 1983. Jonathan Forbes's oft-stated goal of mounting an "Anti Police Film Festival" never came to fruition but DEC wasn't shy in the design of its promotional materials



loudly in the avowedly Marxist Canadian Liberation Movement (1968-1976). Not everyone was happy with the new nationalism. Brain Palmer, for one, argues:

"At the very historical moment when the muffled voice of class began to be heard in Canadian scholarship, then, its weak articulation was overwhelmed with a revived presentation of the myth-symbolism of 'northern nationhood.'" [68]

The members of DEC took pride in the diversity of their interests, connections, and causes. They saw the organization as a type of clearing house for all manner of left/feminist discussions and points of view. As part of the New Left in general, DEC felt the need to radically broaden the political discourse, far beyond traditional class and labor or vanguard party politics. Members felt personal pressure to quickly educate themselves not only about Namibia and Indonesia but also around the bold concept of the women's movement that the "personal is political."

Although the famous Toronto-based gay and lesbian magazine, *Body Politic*, had been launched as early as 1971, for some years DEC had nothing to offer. The first film in the collection to deal explicitly with LGBTQ issues was *In the Best Interests of the Children* (Iris Films, U.S. 1977), a gentle, yet serious work that focused on lesbian mothers—a landmark film says B. Ruby Rich. [69] This was followed by the more raucous Australian production entitled *Witches, Faggots — Dykes and Poofers*, made by Digby Duncan and the One in Seven Collective (1979).

DEC Films continued for another ten years, until the mid-1990s, drawing in some of the most dynamic practitioners of left film activism in Toronto, many with rich family ties to the Caribbean. These included the financial wizard Karen Knopf, the producers John Greyson, Richard Fung, and Helen Lee, and the writer-programmers, Cameron Bailey, Gabriele Hezekiah, Marva Jackson, and Valerie Wint. During the 1980s DEC launched its most ambitious projects, the Colour Positive Anti-Racism Festival, in 1984, and the Euclid Community Film Theatre, in 1987. I will leave the history of these events, plus the final disintegration of DEC, to others and another time.

## To recover and reclaim

Throughout the first ten years of its life DEC Films, along with its sister groups in publishing, radio broadcasting, etc. managed to push the Canadian discussion about development education to the left. In most instances DEC was able to challenge the entire notion of capitalist development in favor of a discourse centered on international solidarity and socialism. Many of the films on international issues in the DEC catalogs stressed the links between first world capitalism and third world poverty. While Canadian government homilies on development strained to highlight the positive aspects of Canadian aid projects abroad, DEC countered with material on revolutionary upheaval or deadly forms of political repression in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. To this end, DEC's most powerful and disturbing films of the '70s and early '80s included *Tongpan* (Isan Film Group, Thailand, 1977), *The Tupamaros* (Jan Lindquist, Uruguay, 1972), *Prisoners of Conscience*, and *El Salvador: The People Will Win*. [70]

During the 1970s DEC Films was fortunate to benefit from the rapidly expanding academic fields of Film and Cultural Studies. These provided the theoretical legitimacy and the tools for DEC's attempts at adult film education, for example running through the *Images In Action* book. DEC's role thus increasingly became not only to provide resources but to push community audiences in particular see more in those resources. Consequently, viewers might value the emotional power and non-verbal knowledge that films could deliver. In the end this meant not simply finding existing audiences, but at times creating them.

*El Salvador: The People Will Win* (Diego de la Texera and the Film Institute of Revolutionary El Salvador, 1981). This was the most powerful and significant of several DEC Films on Central America. Filmmakers traveled day by day inside the centre of combat with the military wing of the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR). It concludes with a sequence where a guerrilla exchanges his camera for a pistol. The message rings clearly. It is not an impartial documentary.



*Minamata: The Victims and Their World* (Noriaki Tsuchimoto, Japan, 1971). Eric Barnouw describes *Minamata* as a particularly successful “catalyst” documentary, along with the later work of Jean Rouch and Ophüls’ *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1970) – artists as “avowed participants” and “provocateurs.”



Then around 1975, Minamata disease broke out amongst the Indigenous peoples of Canada (Indians) and I went at the urgent request of local volunteers.” Noriaki Tsuchimoto, Japanese director of *Hands Across Polluted Waters*.

The 1970s continued what the 1960s New Left had started, launching a new formation that expanded beyond class analysis to include all those suppressed, repressed, and discarded by Canada’s advanced capitalism. DEC’s initial focus on international issues pulled it away from the excesses of Canada’s resurgent nationalism vis-a-vis the United States. Throughout this period DEC took on many films about Canada and many about the menace of U.S. imperialism but none of these abandoned a class analysis. Of course, the resurgent nationalism in Quebec placed a different set of issues on the agenda, but here as well DEC’s films on Quebec focused on the labor and women’s movements.

Finally, DEC’s early films on Indigenous peoples made it clear that Canada’s governments and corporations played an imperial role akin to the U.S. and Britain. Two of these works focus on mercury poisoning in the Northern Ontario community of Grassy Narrows and both show the links between global capitalism, the Canadian state, and home-grown corporate behavior. Significantly, *Grassy Narrows* (Hiro Miyamatsu, 1979) and *Hands Across Polluted Waters* (Noriaki Tsuchimoto, 1975) were made by Japanese filmmakers. Tsuchimoto in particular ranks as one of Japan’s finest documentarists, best known for his *Minamata* series (1970s-80s), also distributed by DEC. The links between media activists from Japan working together with First Nations in Canada certainly pulled the notions of solidarity (let alone development) into a radically different frame. DEC worked hard to promote these films and both were seen by significant numbers of Canadians, providing the first glimpse of these issues that combine racism and environmental degradation.

“And yet, perhaps prompted by this specific case, we must ask, ‘To what effect?’ The tragedy of mercury poisoning at Grassy Narrows carries on to this day—the toxins have not been removed and the various governments continue to delay either clean-up or community compensation.”[71]

In documentary studies these haunting words of Brian Winston in his critique of John Grierson keep this question of documentary use value front and center. After all the thousands of social issue documentaries on, for example, housing problems, starting in the 1930s, says Winston, have any of these problems gone away?[72]

Clarke Mackey, for one, still believes in the power of some documentaries:

“Surely, the Brian Winston question has to be answered with a qualified ‘yes.’ We never get exactly what we want, but things do change over time.”

Or recall, says Jonathan Forbes, one instance when a DEC film made a difference. In 1980 DEC sent *El Salvador: Revolution or Death* to Thunder Bay, Ontario for a community screening organized by the renowned labor activist, Evelina Pan. The day after the screening a new Salvador solidarity group launched in the city.

On another optimistic note we might also emphasize that forty years on many filmmakers championed by DEC continue to produce challenging, powerful cinema. India’s Anand Patwardhan, Argentina’s Juana Sapire, Julia Reichart in the U.S., Sophie Bissonnette and Sylvie Groulx in Quebec, Hiro Miyamatsu in Canada and Japan, Jannik Hastrup in Denmark. As well, thousands of the activists who screened and organized using DEC films still work on many of the same issues confronting Canadian society. To pick just one, Evelina Pan recently helped launch the Thunder Bay chapter of the Canadian Labour International Film Festival (CLiFF).

To return to the debates on the chronology and legacy of Canada’s New Left I’ll turn again to Peter Graham, who calls into question any dismissal of the New Left achievement in transforming daily life in Toronto’s many communities.

"Across a vast spectrum of issues ...New Leftists insisted on putting forward a distinctive agenda. They struggled mightily to transform professions into weapons of people's struggle.... In retrospect, what stands out are not the inevitable limitations of the New Left's bid to transform Toronto's daily life, but its lasting and surprising victories. The New Left remade Toronto in the 1970s. And much of its legacy, even after three decades of neo-liberalism, remains." [73]

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## Notes

1. Eric Alterman, "The Decline of Historical Thinking," *The New Yorker* online, February 4, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/contributors/eric-alterman> [return to page 1]

2. Some of these works would qualify today for the archivist's term "Orphan Films," in the narrow sense that copyright is unknown. But we should also consider the broader definition of orphan. So for example, the Canadian website Cinephemera defines these as "abandoned, rare, almost lost, ephemeral, rediscovered, recently found and neglected." In this sense many of the films discussed here have certainly been neglected. Of course, this type of category and definition begs the question, "Abandoned or neglected by whom?" In the U.S. the Orphan Film movement sponsors symposiums and screenings and much of the activity has been led by film historian Dan Streible at NYU. See for example, his useful introduction "The State of Orphan Films," in *Moving Image*, 9.1, Spring 2009.

3. Video cassettes in the ½ inch VHS format gained a dominant position in non-theatrical distribution in the early 1980's.

4. By 1980 the Development Education Centre employed twelve staff. DEC Films comprised one sub-group. The other sub-groups are discussed below. The term development education reflects the conventional discourse of the 1970s as to those "underdeveloped" or poor countries of the world. The binary of developed/underdeveloped was the preferred approach of most Western governments, including Canada. The concept of a Third World, widely used by the left, conveyed a more specific politics and generally rejected capitalist development as inevitable. The DEC staff of the early 1970s didn't seem overly concerned with the exact terminology. In any case many people used the films without any real idea what DEC stood for.

5. The notion of documentary emotion, both on-screen and within the audience has not always received its due in film studies. One exception can be found in the elegant writing of New Zealand scholar Russell Campbell, in "Warrendale and the Representation of Emotion in Documentary Film." (Paper given at the History of Emotions Conference, Stout Research Centre, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, 3-5 September 2015.

6. *Radical Ambition: A Portrait of the Toronto New Left, 1958-1985*. PhD Dissertation, Department of History, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada, 2016, p. 29. Graham's dissertation has been reworked for publication as Peter Graham with Ian McKay. *Radical Ambition: The New Left in Toronto* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2019). This rich book is also notable for its extensive annotated bibliography covering dozens of key issues, a significant contribution to the rapid growth in historical scholarship about the Canadian New Left.

7. Brian D. Palmer, *Canada's 1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009). For the New Left in particular, Palmer draws extensively on the analysis of Myrna Kostash's earlier work, *Long Way From Home: The Story of the Sixties Generation in Canada* (Toronto:

Lorimer, 1980) and also on the writings of Cy Gonick, long-time editor of *Canadian Dimension*, many of which are now reprinted in *Canada Since 1960: A People's History* (Toronto: Lorimer, 2016). Another dimension to Toronto's New Left history is explored in the important autobiography of Burnley "Rocky" Jones. Jones was a key figure in African Canadian politics, education debates, and legal struggles beginning in the mid- 1960s. See Jones and James W. St.G. Walker, *Burnley "Rocky" Jones: Revolutionary* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2016).

8. Regarding the feminist challenge to the New Left, one of the best accounts of these years can be found in Judy Rebick's *Ten Thousand Roses: The Making of a Feminist Revolution* (Toronto: Penguin, 2005), a volume astute in its national scope and its serious treatment of the women's movement in Quebec. In addition, Joan Sangster provides a detailed discussion of socialist feminism in "Radical Ruptures: Feminism, Labor, and the Left in the Long Sixties in Canada," *American Review of Canadian Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 1, March 2010, pp 1-21.

9. For a wide-ranging discussion of Challenge for Change, see Thomas Waugh, Michael Baker, and Ezra Winton, *Challenge for Change: Activist Documentary at the National Film Board of Canada* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010).

10. Bethune participated in a North American tour of the film in 1937. At one screening in Montreal a fascist mob of 2,500 rioted and disrupted the screening. See Larry Hannant, ed. *The Politics of Passion: Norman Bethune's Writing and Art* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998).

11. At present I am not aware of archival records that detail these showings – definitely an area for research. One possible line of inquiry might start with the archives for Union Films, which Charles Musser has described as "the leading producer of left-wing documentaries in the United States in the immediate post World War II era." See "Discovering Union Films and Its Archives," *Cinémas*. Vol. 24, No 2-3, Spring, 2014. DEC Films carried *Deadline for Action*, one of the Union Films in its collection, starting in the late 1970s. That film can be seen at The Internet Archive, [www.archive.org/details/Deadline1946](http://www.archive.org/details/Deadline1946).

12. Scott Forsyth, "Communists, Class and Culture in Canada," in Malek Khouri and Darrell Varga, eds. *Working on Screen: Representations of the Working Class in Canadian Cinema* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006). Forsyth draws his information from the *Daily Clarion* and *New Frontier*, two publications affiliated with the CPC.

13. See Dennis J. Duffy "Evangelists': The Other Cinema of Dorothy and Oscar Burritt," *Amateur Cinema.org*.  
<https://www.amateurcinema.org/index.php/article/evangelists-the-other-cinema-of-dorothy-and-oscar-burritt>. Accessed Feb. 4, 2019.

14. Réal La Rochelle discusses these key films in "Committed documentary in Quebec: A Still-Birth?" in Tom Waugh's, *Show Us Life: Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1984). See also Michel Houle, "Themes and ideology in Québec Cinema," [Jump Cut 22, May 1980](#).

15. The history of DEC's founding is somewhat more complex than implied here, as there were a number of people both within and outside Oxfam who had wanted to begin this work of critical development education. The name "Development Education Centre" had been used briefly in Oxfam in 1971, but according to Forbes the project had become dormant. I believe that Forbes primarily can be credited with reviving the project and taking it beyond Oxfam. Several Oxfam people gave enthusiastic support to Forbes and he managed to bring some of them onto the newly established DEC board. These included John O'Grady, D'Arcy Martin, Anita Shilton, and Rosalie Abella, later to become a Supreme Court of Canada judge.

16. The Haslemere Declaration (1968) emerged, in part, within the context of the Fair Trade movement. See Andrea Franc, "What 'fair trade' was originally about: The Haslemere Declaration of 1968." *Imperial and Global Forum*, May 3, 2018. <https://imperialglobalexeter.com/2018/05/03/what-fair-trade-was-originally-about-the-haslemere-declaration-of-1968/>
17. Peter Graham observes that the influence of the British left on Toronto's politics has been under-researched. The experience of Jonathan Forbes and his formative role at DEC reflects that idea.
18. Between the Lines (BTL), was created as a joint venture with Dumont Press Graphics in Kitchener. It remains the only sub-group of DEC still in existence; four of the founders from DEC and Dumont are still involved. See Robert Clarke, *Books Without Bosses: 40 Years of Reading Between the Lines* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2017).
19. One good source of some of the debates and priorities for the left can be found in *Canada Since 1960*, *op cit.*, an anthology of articles from *Canadian Dimension*, founded in 1963.
20. Quebec's most perceptive historian of the left media is Marc Raboy. See, for example his *Media and Messages* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1984) which provides an overview of this ferment.
21. For McKay's descriptions and analysis of Matrix-events, Supersedure and Formations see *Rebels, Reds, Radicals: Rethinking Canada's Left History* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2005) pp. 95-122.
22. McKay, *Rebels ...*, p. 112.
23. See the special issue on the rencontres published by the *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* (v. 24, No 2, 2016).
24. The attack was reported in Toronto's papers, including *The Toronto Star*, April 8, 1974. The Western Guard is discussed in Stanley R. Barrett's *Is God a Racist?: The Right Wing in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).
25. Graham, *Radical Ambition*, p. 291. See also Toronto's *Contrast* magazine, an important resource for African Canadian news and analysis in the 1970s (No.27, Feb. 1976). A short film, on the Third World Books and Crafts store, entitled *50 Years of Black Activism*, can be found at <https://www.ryerson.ca/akua-benjamin-project/watch-50-years-of-black-activism/> (Ryerson University, Akua Benjamin project, 2016).
26. Gary Crowdus had also attended the Montreal Rencontres in 1974. His analysis appeared in "The Montreal 'New Cinema Conference'," *Cineaste* 6.3 (June 1975). For more on Crowdus see [Renee Tajima-Peña](#) "The Guild Complex: An Interview with Gary Crowdus." International Documentary Association, September 1, 1989. <https://www.documentary.org/feature/guild-complex-and-interview-gary-crowdus>.
27. The film is discussed by Bill Nichols in the larger context of the U.S. Newsreel group of filmmakers in *Newsreel: Documentary Filmmaking on the American Left (1971-1975)*, PhD Dissertation, UCLA, 1978, p. 139-140. Nichols played a key role in building a culture of left-wing film theory in Canada, as chair of the Film Studies Department at Queen's University, Kingston. Among many others (myself included), Sophie Bissonnette, director of *A Wives Tale*, studied with Nichols.
28. Interview with Kae Elgie, September, 2016. For an important analysis of the film, including discussion of the many people involved, see Dan Georgakas, "Finally Got the News: the Making of *Radical Documentary*," *Cineaste*, Vol. 5,



no. 4, 1973 (the film can be seen on youtube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RgJd\\_MvJVzg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RgJd_MvJVzg).)

29. Interview with Glen Richards, September 25, 2016. [[return to page 2](#)]

30. Richards, in a 1983 DEC Films group interview with Margaret Cooper, "The Challenge of Radical Film Distribution: Conversations with Toronto's DEC Films Collective, in Tom Waugh, *Show Us Life*, pp. 302-317. Originally published in [Jump Cut 28, April 1983](#), pp. 37-40.

32. Graham and McKay, *Radical Ambition*, p. 269.

32. The best exponent today of this attempt to link radical art and working-class organizations, and to exhibit outside mainstream art and film venues, is undoubtedly the Mayworks Festival of Working-People and the Arts. Mayworks was formed in Toronto, in 1985, and now includes "chapters" in several other Canadian cities. The festival was also taken up in 2012 by the Washington State Labor Council.

33. Interview with Rosemary Donegan, June, 2019.

34. Friere was also in Canada at the invitation of several Brazilian leftist academics who formed part of a growing refugee community in Canada following the military coup in 1964.

35. For a summary of this work in Canada by a leading participant in the movement, see, Budd Hall "In from the Cold? Reflections on Participatory Research From 1970 – 2005," [The American Sociologist](#). December 1992, Volume 23, [Issue 4](#), pp. 15–28. Hall stresses the origins of Participatory Research not only in the work of Friere but in the Julius Nyerere government of Tanzania in the early 1970s.

36. *Starting From Nina* can be seen through the Internet Archive, here: <https://archive.org/details/startingfromninathepoliticsoflearning>.

37. Interview with Ferne Cristall, March, 2018.

38. For an extended analysis of *Rape* see Julia Lesage, "Disarming film *Rape*," [Jump Cut, No. 19, Dec. 1978](#).

39. Cristall in Cooper, in Waugh, op cit.

40. John Hess, "*The History Book: A New Look at History from the Bottom Up*," [Jump Cut 6, 1975](#), pp. 7-8.

41. A special issue of the international animation journal "*FPS – Frames Per Second*" from March, 2005 features the films (<http://www.fpsmagazine.com/mag/2005/03/fps200503lo.pdf>).

42. See <http://subversivefestival.com/en/about-festival/>

43. Another important document on Gleyzer, including comments on the making of *Mexico...*, can be found in [Anthony Chassi](#), "Interview: Juana Sapire on Raymundo Gleyzer," *Screen Slate*, February 26th 2019.

44. Barbara Halpern Martineau, Chuck Kleinhans, and Peter Steven. *Une Histoire de femmes: A Wives Tale*: Interview with Sudbury Strike filmmakers. *Jump Cut* 26, December 1981, pp. 26-29.

45. Barbara Halpern Martineau, *Une Histoire de femmes: A Wives Tale*, *Jump Cut*, no. 26, December 1981, p. 25.

46. Interview with Glen Richards, Sept. 2016

47. Kleinhans' "Forms, politics, makers, and contexts: basic issues for a theory of radical political documentary," in Waugh, *Show Us Life*, pp. 318-342. In 2018 Tom Waugh described Kleinhans' essay thus, "I had never before encountered such tough talk and lucid truth-telling," in *Jump Cut* 58, Spring 2018. This analysis was brought up to date by Kleinhans in "Imagining Change: A Short History of Radical Film in the U.S.A.," *Jump Cut* 58, Spring, 2018.) [[return to page 3](#)]
48. See Liz Czach, "Affective labor and the work of film festival programming," in *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice*, eds. Marijke de Valck et al. (London: Routledge, 2016).
49. Rouch's approach, properly known as cinéma vérité, can best be seen in *Chronique d'un été* [*Chronicle of a Summer*], 1961.
50. For more on Walter Tournier, who continues to create important animation in Uruguay, see the Fundación del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano.  
<http://cinelatinoamericano.org/cineasta.aspx?cod=486>
51. The English translation, by Julianne Burton, of this key text (written in Spanish in 1967) can be found [Jump Cut 20, 1979, pp. 24-26](#). See Michael Chanan's *The Cuban Image* (London: BFI, 1985) for a detailed discussion of the essay and its influence on the films of the period.
52. See Julianne Burton, "Democratizing Documentary: Modes of Address in the Latin American Cinema, 1958-72," in Waugh, *Show Us Life*, p. 345.
53. See in particular the fascinating analysis by [Shweta Kishore](#): "Participation, poetry and song: Anand Patwardhan and New Latin American cinema," [Jump Cut 57, 2016](#). Patwardhan's *Prisoners of Conscience* (1977) can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RHFaEybyvNA>.
54. See, "Introduction." *The Documentary Film Book*, ed. Brian Winston (London: British Film Institute, 2013).
55. See Randolph Lewis, *Emile de Antonio: Radical Filmmaker in Cold War America*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), p. 42.
56. Lothar Spree was born in Germany, hence the interest in Brecht, but had been teaching at the Ontario College of Art, in Toronto, in the 1970s. He subsequently worked in several countries making many films. Spree died in 2013 in Berlin.
57. Tricontinental was later renamed UNIFILM, a merger with the Latin American Film Project – 1980-1983. [[return to page 4](#)]
58. For more on Tricontinental see Jonathan Buchsbaum, "Militant Third World Film Distribution in the United States, 1970-1980" in *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, V.24. N.2, Fall 2015.
59. For analysis and insight into Jorge Silva and Marta Rodriguez's extraordinary film, *The Brickmakers* (Colombia, 1966-1972), see Julianne Burton's interview with the filmmakers in *Cinema and Social Change in Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), pp. 25-35, and also Dennis West and Joan M. West, "[Conversation with Marta Rodríguez](#)," [Jump Cut, 38, June 1993](#), pp. 39-44.
60. See Sylvia Harvey, "The Other Cinema—A History: Part I, 1970-77," *Screen* 26.6, 1985.
61. The founder of Contemporary Films was Charles Cooper. The 2001 *Guardian* obituary, which mentions his links to the British Communist Party, provides a glimpse into his important work:  
<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2001/dec/04/guardianobituaries.filmnews>.  
<http://www.contemporaryfilms.com/profile/profile.html>.

62. For additional analysis of Newsreel see "Newsreel Film and Revolution," Bill Nichols, *Cineaste*, Vol. 5 #4, 1973; Debra Goldman, "A Decade of Building An Alternative Movement," *The Independent* - Vol. 6. No. 7, 1983; Michael Renov, "Early Newsreel," *AfterImage*, February 1987; Michael Renov, "Newsreel: Old and New--Towards An Historical Profile," *Film Quarterly*, Fall 1987; and Coco Fusco, "Radical Media Review," *The Independent*, Vol.11, #3, April 1988. For Third World Newsreel and California Newsreel see John Downing, *Radical Media* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), pp. 125-146. See also Sherry Milner, [Interview with Christine Choy: Third World Newsreel —ten years of left film](#), *Jump Cut*, no. 27, July 1982, pp. 21-22.

63. Throughout the 70s and 80s DEC maintained close relations with Debbie Zimmerman at Women Make Movies, Jonathan Miller, of Icarus, Gary Crowdus at Cinema Guild, and Jan Rofekamp at Films Transit, in Montreal.

64. Richards, in Cooper, in Waugh, *Show Us Life*. p. 304.

65. *Images in Action* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1986).

66. Cristall and Emanuel, *Images in Action*, pp. 43-44

67. Cristall, in Cooper, in Waugh, *Show Us Life*. p. 304.

68. Palmer, "Review Essay: Rhyming Reds and Fractious Fictions: Canada's Heritage of Literary Radicalism." *American Review of Canadian Studies*, Vol. 34 Issue 1, 2004. p. 103.

69. B. Ruby Rich *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 124.

70. Michael Chanan provided a substantial review of this important film in, ["Resistance," Jump Cut 26. December 1981](#), pp. 21-23.

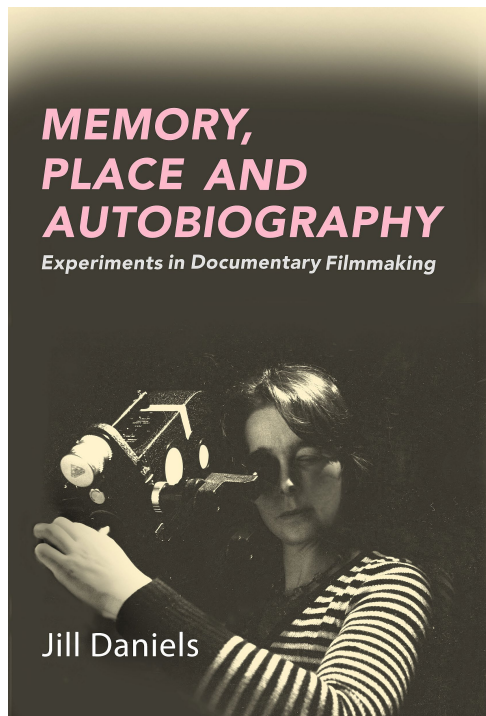
71. For a recent summary of the disastrous situation at Grassy Narrows see [David Bruser](#) and Jayme Poisson, "Ontario knew about Grassy Narrows mercury site for decades, but kept it secret," *Toronto Star*, Nov. 11, 2017, and also David Bruser ["Grassy Narrows residents welcome visit by UN-appointed investigator," Toronto Star](#), May 27, 2019. A community Facebook page, at [freegrassy.net](#), provides contemporary information on the continuing struggle.

72. Winston refers to Grierson as setting in motion the "victim documentary." For his strongest critical statement on this tradition see *Claiming the Real: Documentary: Grierson and Beyond*, especially chapter 10 (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995), pp. 46-55.

73. Graham, *Radical Ambition*, PhD Dissertation, p. 388.







Autobiographical films by Jill Daniels:



*My Private Life*, 2014, 63 min.

## Mediating memory, self and screen

review by [Gail Vanstone](#)

*Memory, Place and Autobiography: Experiments in Documentary Filmmaking*. Jill Daniels (Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2019)

Jill Daniels' primary focus in *Memory, Place and Autobiography* is a close examination of the autobiographical experimental film, offering a closely wrought case study of a set of important theoretical and philosophic considerations. In this study, autobiography offers an ideal domain for taking up the complex question of subjectivity and mediation of memory, particularly in the arena of trauma. To these, Daniels adds considerations of place which she sees functioning as triggers to memory, sites of metaphor and metonymy. All this, in the service of proposing that the filmic image is valuable, not just as data for analysis, but in conveying knowledge (2).

The book details Daniels' process meticulously. Combining filmic tropes of realism and fictional enactment, the filmmaker takes up the question of how to 'mediate memory through cinematic means' (130). Interviews, remediation of found footage, archival material, images of objects and photos from the past, she argues, become fodder in the hands of the experimental filmmaker to create 'uncertain and unreliable' (131) narratives, memetic, evocative, even poetic in nature. With this methodology in hand, Daniels, inhabiting the dual role of maker and subject (implicated or actual), becomes cultural guide in an exploration of the social world.

One of the strengths of the book is its account of British independent filmmaking from the seventies onward, drawn directly from the filmmaker's experience. While a number of scholars have examined radical and experimental filmmaking during this period, the received history of British documentary, the analysis of mainstream, largely TV-based work, outweighs this body. Daniels' first-person account, as a member of the nationally organized movement of independent film activists, speaks with the authority of an insider, one who has remained steadfastly within the ranks of independent filmmaking although she argues that, today, the term has been drained of its early oppositional stance. The book, then, presents as a memoir of this movement, valuable since it comes from a woman who is, at once, scholar, filmmaker, former activist in socialist feminist politics, steadfastly dedicated to maintaining her stance.

Daniel's book joins recent literature on the autobiographical film, namely, Alisa Lebow's edited collection *The Cinema of Me: The Self and Subjectivity in First Person Documentary* (Wallflower Press, 2012) and Laura Rascaroli's *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* (Wallflower Press, 2009). *Memory, Place and Autobiography's* elaboration on subjectivity, implicating filmmaker and her subject(s) resonates with Lebow's point that the 'I' is always social and in relation, but ontologically speaking is always, in effect, the first person plural 'we' (Lebow, 3). As a case study, Daniels' book illuminates Rascaroli's notion that the socially constructed self is, likewise, 'decentred, split, liquid, protean, displaced, multiple, schizophrenic' (Rascaroli, 10) and, saddled with the unreliability of memory, inhabits her films (in Bordwell's terms) as "real



*My Private Life II*, 2015, 25 min.

empirical persons, enunciating subjects, structured absences, fictive structure, or a combination of [all] these' (Bordwell, *Making Meaning* 35).

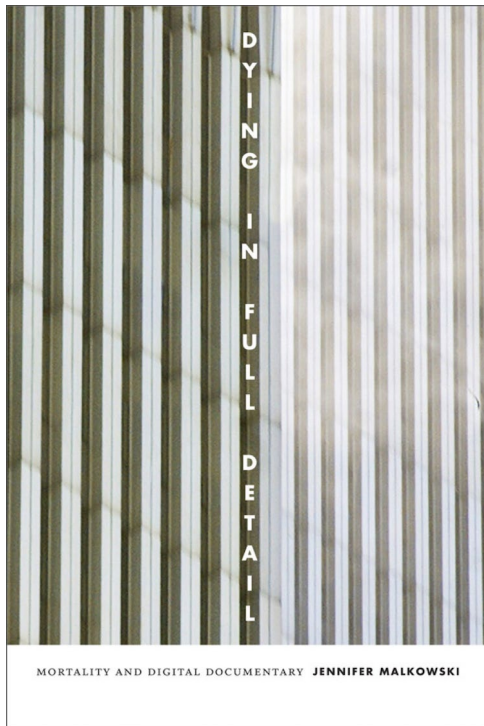
Split into five sections, including one on new media, *Memory, Place and Autobiography* presents as a welcome guide to how personal vision can be articulated in experimental form.

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The front cover of *Dying in Full Detail: Mortality and Digital Documentary* features an edited version of *The Falling Man*, Richard Drew's well-known photograph of a man who leapt from the upper floors of the North Tower during the 9/11 attacks.

## The ethics and politics of death images in contemporary visual culture

review by [Lucas Anderson](#)

Jennifer Malkowski. *Dying in Full Detail: Mortality and Digital Documentary*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017, 269 pages.

Be it through documentary footage or narrative fiction, film uses and also profoundly influences our understanding of dying and death. This film-death relation is the topic of Jennifer Malkowski's book *Dying in Full Detail: Mortality and Digital Documentary*, which endeavours to identify the ethics and politics of documenting, distributing, and looking at death on film in this era of digital image-making technologies and new media. Malkowski analyzes how developments in digital technologies have restructured how we encounter and respond to images of the deaths of others. Such research is necessitated by the fact that death images that document institutionalized oppression now overlap with unethical online media consumption, wherein death images are treated as spectacles and are co-opted on exploitative websites. While the book traces the promise in ethical and political possibilities afforded by digital cinematography and online media sharing services, it argues that these developments have given rise to further ethical complications for documentary renderings of death, which have yet to harness a redemptive social purpose. In that sense, the argument is pessimistic.

*Dying in Full Detail* thoroughly chronicles the history of capturing death on film. The book's four chapters follow a historical chronology so as to emphasize how digital technologies have now modified the process of documenting death—something formerly determined by celluloid film's capabilities. Malkowski underscores that cultural attitudes toward death vary in different historical contexts, and that film intersects with, and sometimes influences, these particular historical moments. The book's chief focus is on the ethics surrounding documentary footage of actual human death, but Malkowski's analysis also weaves in references to narrative cinema's depictions of death because these convey popular and influential interpretations of what dying looks like.

Malkowski's study emphasizes that admirable ethical stances seldom motivate people filming or seeking out images of death. Rather, for those who film and view it, death often represents a grim curiosity given its unknowable qualities and inevitability. Such curiosity can lead to dispassionate, misguided, and unethical interactions with documentary images of death. Malkowski, on the other hand, commendably navigates this delicate topic, which is complicated by the diverse particulars of natural death, suicide, and deaths where someone is killed by another person or an outside force. The author's approach upholds a humanistic ethics of serious compassion for the lives of those who are near or succumbing to death, and Malkowski remains careful to account for how film's medium-specific qualities mediate interactions with death.





*The Falling Man.* Malkowski analyzes the controversy generated by this photograph due to its commingling of death (an “about to die” image, as Malkowski puts it) and a sublime visual aesthetic. This type of interrelation between death and aesthetics is central to *Dying in Full Detail*’s arguments regarding the reception of digital documentary footage of death.

Although Malkowski makes clear that observing the end of a life stands as a powerful experience, *Dying in Full Detail* argues that this affective component should not overdetermine the reception of documentary images of death. The book does not deny the emotional intensity of such images, but it strives to establish a justification for engaging with images of death that would exceed the compassionate response to the dying subject’s mortality. Malkowski proposes that an ethics of filming death lies in the redemptive potential found in documentary depictions that would directly provoke social or political change by way of capturing and circulating images of deaths under oppressive circumstances. While this theory offers a credible solution to the abuse of death images, the author’s analysis finds that even this category of documentation is troublingly bound up in understandings of death as an aesthetic and cinematic event.



Malkowski identifies Annie’s death in *Imitation of Life* (1959) as an “archetypal deathbed scene” from a narrative film. Annie’s head begins to droop, her speech trails off, and her eyes struggle to remain open before they become fixed and lifeless, providing all the conventional signs of the moment of death.

*Dying in Full Detail* will prove informative to readers who are interested in taking seriously the saturation of death images in contemporary visual culture. On this note, the book is an effective study of the convergence of moving image media and multiple online spaces; both media technology and the Internet are evolving so rapidly, they require sustained ethical and political analysis. In addition, historians and film scholars will value Malkowski’s rigorous knowledge of the history of “death culture” and of film history, as well as acknowledging documentary cinema that pursues alternative approaches to visualizing death. For example, the author’s praise for resistant works like Rithy Pahn’s *The Missing Picture* (2013) resonates amid the book’s primarily sombre and critical tone. Meanwhile, for a non-specialized readership, Malkowski’s lucid treatment of aesthetics, film theory, and new media theory makes for an accessible read that is assisted by the inclusion of references to popular Hollywood films and television shows.



Striking visuals are interspersed throughout *Dying in Full Detail*. These images, and Malkowski’s at times frank descriptions of the deaths considered in the book, do not shield readers from the unsettling and sometimes graphic realities of death; still, the selection of death images is neither exploitative nor needlessly gratuitous. Malkowski acts as the reader’s guide, carefully justifying the attention given to each image. Again, the images are used either to recover the ethics that are violated in misguided representations of death, or in an attempt to approach a social or political purpose for the given death image. Although the work’s concern lies in locating this redemptive meaning, its visuals will nonetheless affect readers and perhaps deter some from reading the book altogether. But images of these deaths exist, and they are increasingly common today.

*Dying in Full Detail*’s first chapter, “Capturing the ‘Moment’: Photography, Film, and Death’s Elusive Duration,” elucidates film’s interlinked relationship with

Director Rithy Panh's *The Missing Picture* (2013) is a meditation on the status of images as testimony and witness to genocide. In the film, Panh, a survivor of the Cambodian genocide, uses clay figurines to reconstruct a visuality for his family and the others who lived, suffered, and died under the Khmer Rouge regime, but whose traumas went unrepresented in the archive of this history – one for which only Khmer Rouge propaganda images survived.



Alexander Gardner's and Mathew Brady's photographs of battlefield deaths during the American Civil War (1861-1865) are examples of the "too late" history of early death images. Immobile nineteenth century photography equipment with long exposure times prevented early war photographers from capturing views of ongoing battles, so they instead depicted only the aftermath of warfare.



Abraham Zapruder was equipped with his 8mm home movie camera while attending John F. Kennedy's presidential visit to Dallas, Texas, in 1963. As the president's motorcade passed his onlooking position, Zapruder inadvertently filmed the moment of the president's assassination and its immediate aftermath.

death. The chapter begins with the advent of photography in the 1830s, continues through the arrival of motion picture film in the 1890s, and closes with the conclusion of the Vietnam War in the 1970s. During this time span, which accounts for the lead-up to the release of digital video, there was a cultural interest in revealing the "moment of death"—that instant when the living body becomes a lifeless corpse. Malkowski finds that celluloid documentary images consistently failed to capture this precise moment as a result of the restricted mobility of early photography equipment, celluloid film's durational limitations, and the expense of film stock. Instead, Malkowski explains, this ethically suspect pursuit typically communicated death "too late," showing corpses and post-mortem images rather than the moment of death. The chapter analyzes early war photography, lynching photographs, and images of Second World War-era atrocities to demonstrate this type of documentary imaging.

Malkowski, following the work of Vivian Sobchack, explains that violent deaths were overemphasized in the twentieth century due to the prevalence of warfare. Consequently, photography and both documentary and narrative cinema misled public understanding of death by representing it as an instantaneous and violent occurrence, while in fact most people continued to die slowly on deathbeds or in prolonged hospital stays. The "too late" kind of imagery began to cede to "on time" death documentaries in the 1960s and 1970s, notably in Abraham Zapruder's amateur footage of John F. Kennedy's assassination, as well as in images from the Vietnam War, like the *Execution of Nguyen Van Lem* photograph from 1968. Still, the most common form of death went unrepresented while violent and dramatic images dominated screen representations of death in these decades.

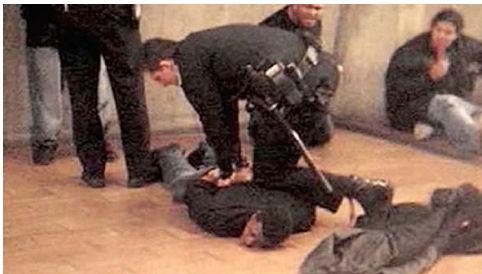
Malkowski acknowledges a debt to Vivian Sobchack's essay, "Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary," which established an analytical vocabulary for negotiating ethics vis-à-vis death on (celluloid) film. Sobchack's 1984 essay persuasively defines five "gazes" and one "stare" that address the ethics, or lack thereof, present in different practices of filming images of death. Though in dialogue with Sobchack's framework, *Dying in Full Detail* intervenes by addressing how the advent of digital film and online distribution channels requires additional terminology to supplement the type of ethical analysis that Sobchack delivered some three decades earlier. In classifying "gazes" of the digital era, Malkowski focuses on the affordances of digital image-making technologies, which include the greater immediacy and mobility found in portable digital and mobile phone cameras, as well as the extended durational capacities of digital video and digital film in comparison with celluloid film stock.

The book's second chapter, "The Art of Dying, on Video: Deathbed Documentaries," explores how the use of digital video permitted the creation of deathbed documentaries beginning in the 1980s. These documentaries reflect contextual, then prevalent cultural attitudes that valued an individualization of death – the end of life was to be determined on one's own terms, and the making of these films assisted in this difficult process. One notable trend in deathbed documentaries was the emergence of films documenting gay men who were dying of AIDS. Malkowski's analysis suggests that as much as these films achieved political visibility for dying AIDS victims, they possessed limited political value because they were individualized and therefore often more generally unrelatable. These were personalized films that focused on life and the grieving process while doing little to illuminate death itself or motivate social change by extension.

*Dying in Full Detail's* severest, yet warranted, criticism appears in the book's third chapter, "A Negative Pleasure: Suicide's Digital Sublimity." This chapter analyzes *The Bridge* (Eric Steel, 2006), a film that documents people ending their lives by leaping from the Golden Gate Bridge into the bay below. The crew for this digital documentary continuously shot footage of the bridge for one year with the intention of documenting suicides, a project that the filmmaker described as awareness-raising and preventative. *The Bridge* motivates Malkowski to name a digital-era "expectant gaze," wherein the filmmaker seeks out locations where



A still image from *The Bridge* that is included in *Dying in Full Detail*. This man's death by suicide was filmed by *The Bridge*'s crew, an act that Malkowski positions as an example of the digital age's unethical "expectant gaze."



This still image shows Oscar Grant pinned to the ground moments before he was lethally shot in the back by a police officer. Grant's death was primarily filmed with cellphone cameras that produced shaky and only partial views of the incident.



Several protestors filmed Neda Agha-Soltan's final moments in close proximity after she was shot. Malkowski's analysis argues that these facial close-ups—which recall the conventions of death scenes in narrative films—were pivotal to the widespread response that Agha-Soltan's death generated on social media.

death is likely to be seen, and then, exploiting the inexpensive and uninterrupted nature of digital cinematography, expectantly films until a death occurs. Malkowski delivers a convincing indictment of this film's doubly unethical approach, as it implicates its viewer in the on-screen search for suicides, and it deliberately aims for a "sublime" suicide aesthetic. The author again ties *The Bridge* into the conventions of narrative cinema's visualizations of death, asserting that it goes as far as to forge a protagonist out of one of the unconsenting subjects whose death it documented. Malkowski's theory of the expectant gaze, as exemplified by *The Bridge*, reveals the ethical corruptibility of digital technology's durational and budgetary affordances.

In assessing the contemporary landscape of death on film, *Dying in Full Detail*'s fourth chapter, "Streaming Death: The Politics of Dying on YouTube," traverses the online spaces that circulate the twenty-first century's influx of death images. Ethical considerations are especially subordinate in online depictions, where Internet users are free to upload or observe documentary death footage anonymously. In this chapter, Malkowski contributes the essential term "ubiquitous gaze," which refers to the likelihood that deaths in public spaces will be filmed due to the pervasiveness of cell phone cameras. Such an ubiquitous gaze led to socially conscious cell phone filming of two notable deaths in 2009: that of Oscar Grant III, an unarmed black man who was fatally shot by police during an arrest in Oakland, and that of Neda Agha-Soltan, an Iranian woman who was shot by a government militiaman at a protest against the contested results of Iran's 2009 presidential election.

Non-professionals used cell phone cameras to film these politicized deaths from multiple angles and distances, in the process documenting institutionalized, racialized police brutality, and the aggressive suppression of a pro-democracy political demonstrator. However, Malkowski articulates a criticism of the public's online reception of these evidential images, as such images were commonly understood through conceptions of death conditioned by Hollywood cinema. This is to say, factors such as the dying subject's physical appearance, formal considerations such as close-ups and camera angles, and the filmer's ability to visibly frame the death all factor into how the politics of a death might be communicated. For example, Malkowski outlines how Grant's face was obscured from those who could film his death primarily in long shots, and that this positioning contributed to why footage of his unjust killing garnered only with momentary, local demands for police reform. Agha-Soltan's graphic death, meanwhile, was filmed in intimate close-up and was mourned worldwide. Social media users dwelt on the tragedy of Agha-Soltan's violent death, but this online outcry emphasized her femininity and beauty more than the politics surrounding her death. Viewing numbers on streaming platforms indicate that these death documentaries had an extensive reach, but Malkowski's research reveals that this type of footage is also decontextualized on those streaming platforms, which range from YouTube to exploitative gore and death porn websites.

Even if Malkowski's analysis arrives at conclusions that problematize digital documentary representations of death, it demonstrates the complexity of our presently mediated relationship with death. *Dying in Full Detail* argues that film is entangled in cultural conceptions of death, constructing a communicative interchange between actual death, documentary footage of death, and narrative cinema's representations of death. Unfortunately, this loop forecloses the political and social redemption that Malkowski hopes for, which is a serious consequence of film's diverse historical relation with representing death. Malkowski concludes that documentary death's political potential hinges upon the footage's aesthetic presentation. Even when politicized deaths are caught on film, their social use is



contingent upon the extent to which they evoke conventional narrative representations of death.

Jennifer Malkowski's *Dying in Full Detail: Mortality and Digital Documentary* provides a necessary analytical framework for assessing the state of digital documentary death images in contemporary visual culture. Despite its best efforts, Malkowski's work does not uncover evidence of a widely active ethics present in filming or receiving images of death. Nonetheless, the book's defining the "gazes" at work in the digital era remains an essential contribution for interrogating the unethical angles of filming and viewing digital death images.

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## Experiments in state incarceration: an undeclared emergency

Introduction to India special section  
by Jyotika Virdi

On August 5, 2019, the Indian state in a spectacular show of the ascendant right-wing party's coercive power deployed the Indian army to place Kashmir's citizens in a lockdown, suspended phone and internet services, arrested political leaders, and an estimated 4000 activists. Without local consultation Parliament foisted a new administrative structure and abrogated the statute (Article 370) preserving Kashmir's special status, its condition of accession to India after the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan. The state's bifurcation eliminating its autonomy and placing it under the center's dominion is now buried in constitutional challenge in the Supreme Court. However, the public's acquiescence sanctioning this move, even celebrating it in some quarters, signals a disquieting turn in the Indian polity against which the essays in this section assume significance.

Disregarding the irreconcilable, India continues claiming the status of the largest democracy, while the slide toward authoritarianism wins majoritarian consent. Politically mandated, increasingly repressive power, however complete, reveals fissures visible in cultural productions, that while under pressure, manifest nodes of resistance. As cultural spaces for critical appraisal are under assault in India and dissenting voices shrink or are hostage to social media trolling, the task of assaying culture assumes new urgency. The significance of the Indian media section is amplified by the current context, the contemporary political climate aligned to a pernicious rightward swing as in Brazil, Hungary, Poland, Turkey, and the U.S. It enunciates the stakes in which Kashmir's lockdown is both an emblem of the extent of coercive state power--and allegorizes its limits.

In May 2019 three months before the unprecedented experiment with state-wide incarceration, the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) swept to power with Narendra Modi's re-election after his 2014 win. Months prior to the 2019 election an intelligence lapse resulted in the death of 40 security personnel in a terrorist attack in Kashmir. Ghoulishly turning this into an electoral gift, an albeit botched retaliatory air strike on Pakistan transformed national security into productive poll rhetoric, as did the project to document citizenship, seal northeastern borders against "infiltrators" and target Bangladeshi Muslim labor inflow, flagrantly referred to as "termites" in election speeches.

In its previous term in office the BJP intensified the pitch on cultural nationalism, propelling Hindutva politics, i.e., mobilizing Hindu religious symbolism for political ends, resurrecting the holiness of cow protection. Flouting the rule of law around minority Muslims' mob lynching, demanding citizenship proof in the northeastern border states of Assam to track immigrant Muslim labor from Bangladesh, it unabashedly channeled public debate into national-antinational polarity. Mobilizing cross-class support with an unsettling intensity, the Hindutva push back against liberal, inclusive, and pluralistic normative ideals raises

questions about the new direction in India's polity.

The sharply elevated shrillness in Indian public discourse is not sudden but has unfolded strategically in the national mainstream. In the 2014 election the BJP's prime ministerial candidate, Modi, had effectively absolved himself from the damning but unproven taint of his involvement in Gujarat's 2002 Muslim pogrom when he was the state's Chief Minister (2001-2014). He ran his first national campaign on the rhetoric of development and inclusiveness. It was a bid for power after a ten-year hiatus, the BJP having won the center for the first time in 1999-2004, although the party has steadily expanded its footprint at state level governments and is in power or in coalition alliances ruling 20 of 28 states. With no traction for the first 35 years after independence the party grew rapidly in the mid-1980s expanding from 2 seats in 1984 to 86 in 1989. That the 1999-2004 regime that first took control at the center is now regarded its moderate phase gives pause. Will today's Modi be judged as restrained as a more intemperate leadership in the wings takes the reins in future?

Much like Trump's playbook, feeding the public's appetite for one outrageous uproar to the next, political discourse in the last four years has relied on sending up trial balloons with each new outrage normalizing in mainstream discourse what was once unacceptable and relegated to the lunatic fringe. The BJP's systematic discursive campaign and realpolitik embed a virulence bereft of any moral compass: braggarts circulate social media videos of lynching Muslims filmed on cell phones like trophies, senior politicians honor mob members convicted in lynching, an elected member of parliament deifies Mohandas Gandhi's murderer (decrying Gandhi's pacifist Hinduism), rape-accused politicians circumvent the law, unleash violence on rape-victims and their families, and the party has mounted a renewed offensive on human rights, environment, and non-profit organization activists with trumped up charges.

The discursive battles over political grand-narratives and the nation's vision are fought in education, jurisprudence, and of course, the sites of cultural productions encompassing film and media. It has seized traditional and new media—print, television, digital, and social—as well as education, and various professional, state and quasi-state research bodies, where arriving at a middle-ground among the “intelligentsia,” the literati, is becoming increasingly impossible. In 2015 a wave of artists, filmmakers, scientists, and writers returned prestigious state awards protesting the government's inertia toward escalating lynching of Muslims, followed in 2017 by 65 high-level retired bureaucrats' open letter against unrestrained vigilantism, and in 2019 a similar appeal was made by well-known filmmakers. Each time swift retaliation from groups mobilized within the same constituency emerge defending the right-wing agenda, deflecting critique in partisan “whataboutery,” falsely claiming the absence of protests against similar crimes on the Congress party's watch in the past 60 years. The struggle to rein in intellectual spaces has extended to appointments in research bodies, favoring loyalty over academic credentials, and most recently created a stir over the attempt to withdraw nominal privileges of a reputed Emerita of ancient Indian history. Social scientists, heads of high-profile professional bodies have resigned over suppressing information inconvenient to the regime. For instance, in 2018 the chair and two members of the National Statistical Commission quit because bad economic news was concealed.

Education, under state (provincial) jurisdiction, turned school textbooks on history into an embattled arena that in 2014 shifted to universities operating under central state authority. Student protests centered on Dalit and gender issues, free speech, administrative appointments and control through interference in research bodies have manifested in long drawn and very public stand-offs at several premier higher education institutions like Banaras Hindu University, The Film and Television Institute of India in Pune, Hyderabad University, Jadavpur University in Calcutta, and Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi.



In the media world journalists, cartoonists, activists, and media personnel not falling in line with the government's agenda are contending with an unusual level of challenges, from defamation suits to arrests, intensifying the ideological contestation. In 2018 a fictionalized historical extravaganza, Sanjay Leela Bhansali's originally titled *Padmavati*'s film set was targeted by vigilante violence, a bounty placed on the director and star Deepika Padukone, and the Film Certification Board's approval was contested. To mollify the vigilantes the film's title was changed to *Padmavat*, underscoring the film's creative source material, a 16th century poet's imaginative rendering of a 14th century narrative, Sultan Alauddin Khilji's desire for a Hindu queen Padmavati. Nonetheless, several states unwilling to guarantee theater security banned the film. Writers and producers confess the chilling impact the episode will have on self-censorship in the industry.

The surrender however is not complete. Netflix and Amazon Prime series, most recently Deepa Mehta's *Leila*, about a dystopian future Hindutva state, kicked off controversies the state machinery is powerless to control. Transnational media platforms beyond the state's coercive reach do not, however, stop heckling troll armies from going on the offensive, their furor circulating in a loop between social and traditional media, seizing attention on nightly prime-time television debates. Nothing irks the ruling dispensation and its troll armies more than the international media's escape from its reach, its inability to extend the Kashmir-style lockdown on intellectual and cultural workers. Reactions oscillate between celebrating attention from the international press, notably, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* and derision when the op-eds are negative. While domestic spaces for cultural critique are vulnerable to political victimization under the confused set of Internet regulations putatively balancing free and hate speech, materials on platforms beyond its jurisdiction become relatively safe and potent spaces for critique.

The essays in the Indian media section of this issue examine discursive contestations in documentary and fictional films, cutting across mainstream-alternative and Hindi-regional cinemas. They examine the ideological skirmishes marking the rapid transformation India has undergone under the sign of neoliberalism and must be read against the accompanying intensified cultural nationalism dominating the zeitgeist. The authors track resistance through figurations of religious minorities, class, gender, and caste subjected to contradictory pulls of aspirations shaped by globalized market forces and hoary traditionalism. Mallika Khanna creatively defines the "feminist gaze" to investigate the commodification of feminism for aspirational bourgeoisie Indian women, which recent Hindi films have embraced under neoliberalism. Eswaran Swarnavel's essay examines the overlooked Tamil art cinema oeuvre, taking up two recent films. He plots the topography of caste politics against control over real estate whether rental property or the public commons to access burial land. (Speaking directly to his essay is a case of life imitating art in August 2019, a viral video showed a Dalit funeral procession lowering the dead body from a bridge to circumvent access denied to the cremation ground). In Tanushree Ghosh's nuanced essay Vidya Balan's persona in conjunction with her acclaimed film performances are evaluated for the tension in her star-text. Ghosh navigates the conventional tropes burdening women's representations in the tradition-modernity complex. Leading the section is Jyotsna Kapur's review of radical documentarian Anand Patwardhan's four-hour film, by far his most ambitious undertaking, *Reason/Vivek* (2018). It speaks to the violent turn the struggle for hegemony of intellectual ideas has taken that this introduction sketches.

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## The battle for democracy and the necessity of *Reason/Vivek*: resistance, memory, and song of hope

by [Jyotsna Kapur](#)



Four Dalit (lowest caste) men tied to a car and beaten on a rumor they had skinned a cow live. The video went viral.



Beaten in full public view with an iron rod.



Patwardhan interviews a bystander a month later who says ...



... it was just an ordinary beating.

Lately, not a day goes by when one does not hear of one brutal attack after another in India on unarmed people. Muslims and Dalits, including children, have been lynched in broad daylight. People are beaten up for Facebook posts, academics fired or publicly humiliated for criticizing Modi or his government, and four public intellectuals have been assassinated in four years. Videos and photographs of these are circulated on social media; technology is used to dismantle civilization—tearing apart the body, dignity, and personhood of another by mobs in the most primitive of ways—with sticks, stones, and bare hands. With the general elections just concluded and Modi's re-election secured, the violence has further escalated. As I write this, it has been a month since the state of Kashmir has been under lockdown; its special status, guaranteed by the constitution, revoked by the Central Government. In the North-East state of Assam, two million people have been declared “stateless.”

In the midst of this unrelenting barrage of shock and awe, Anand Patwardhan's epic eight-part documentary series *Reason/Vivek* (2018) comes as a steadying anchor that clears the head and builds courage. It is documentary cinema at its most powerful, offering history and analysis as a source of hope. Where these daily attacks and their images hit us in the gut, making reality itself seem cinematic, *Reason/Vivek* uses cinema to gather these violent fragments to reveal underlying historical patterns. *Reason/Vivek* pulls us out of the paralyzing moment of torture to show that while it may seem eternal, it is not—there is a before and after it. It is out of history—both of the persistence of Hindutva ideology and its repeated defeats by democratic and secular forces—that Patwardhan pulls out the hope that dark as this time may be, it will be if, we pull together, short lived.

Towards the middle of the series, Anand Patwardhan interviews a resident of Una, Gujarat, where four young Dalit men were just a month ago tied to a van and beaten in full public view, supposedly following a rumor that they had skinned a cow live. Patwardhan asks a bystander,

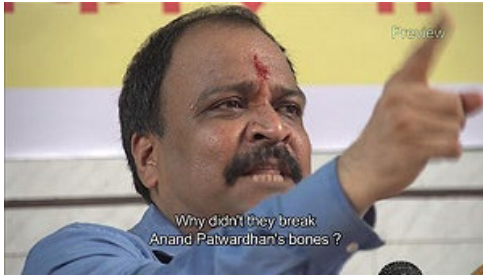
“Was the beating not a crime?”

The answer he gets is chilling. Without a modicum of empathy for the victims, shame or even embarrassment, the man replies:

“It was an ordinary beating. Just an ordinary beating. An ordinary beating.”

The repetitive insistence of these lines is evidence of the slide into a totalitarian

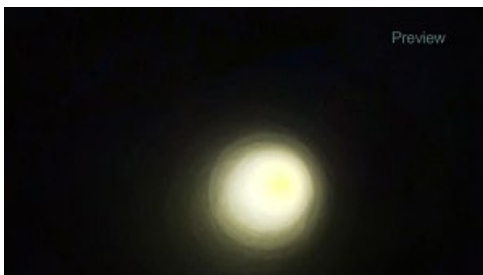




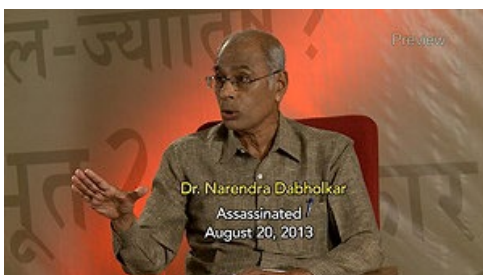
The speaker says the police should break Patwardhan's bones.



In the audience the filmmaker calmly replies.



The opening of the film. A motorcycle comes toward us.



Cut to Narendra Dabholkar speaking to an audience, as sounds of shots ring out.

mindset. It is a shift that the film not only records and reveals, but resists with everything that it can muster, including the filmmakers' bodies. The camera, in the hands of Patwardhan and Simantini Dhuru brings us face-to-face with the poisonous mixture of rage, servile conformity, cunning cowardice, and fascination for spectacle that characterizes the culmination of the Hindutva forces under the current BJP-led government with Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister.

At one point, Patwardhan stands filming among the audience at a panel discussion where one of the panelists, a lawyer, declares that the police should have broken the bones of Anand Patwardhan and the likes of him for disrupting social order. Patiently raising his hand, when given the chance to speak, Patwardhan replies:

"I am standing here. Take whatever action you want to."

The calm conviction with which Patwardhan speaks these words runs through the entire film.

The film draws its calm determination from the awareness of its own place in an unfolding history. Absolutely clear on its own political position, the film also compels the viewer to judge and take sides. Moreover, Patwardhan narrates this history not with one or two protagonists, but by tracing the complex and conflicting interconnections between individuals, events, and larger historical patterns. He takes us into the lives and homes of those who resist, bringing us in touch with their everyday courage, humanity, and dignity. The film rallies and analyzes, but it also stops to mourn and listen to dreams of another future.

One of the threads that tie the film together is the assassination of four intellectuals who have challenged the ideology of the *Sangh Parivar*, i.e., fundamentalists groups aligned around the idea of India as a Hindu nation.[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) These assassinations occurred over the period of the film's making and the film places itself firmly in their path, carrying on their life's work into the future. We are introduced to Narendra Achyut Dabholkar, Gobind Pansare, M.M. Kalburgi, and Gauri Lankesh. Dabholkar, a doctor and activist, led a life-long battle against superstition as a leader in the Anti-Blind Faith Committee. He was assassinated on August 20, 2013, while on his morning walk in Pune, Maharashtra. Pansare was a lawyer, historian, and socialist, who was shot and killed in Kolhapur, Maharashtra, while on a walk with his wife, on February 20, 2015. Pansare had organized against caste and communal violence by stressing the socialist roots of India's anti-colonial movement and the secularism of working class, peasant culture. Kalburgi was a renowned professor of literature and former Vice Chancellor of Kannada University, Hampi. His research on the 12th century saint Basava, showed the saint to be critical of Brahmanical dominance, hypocrisy and superstition. He was shot at point blank range in his home on August 30, 2015. Gauri Lankesh was a journalist who ran a weekly and was an outspoken critic of the growing Hindu right-wing extremism. She was shot seven times outside her home on September 5, 2017. In all four instances, the assassins had arrived and escaped on motorcycles.

The film opens on a dark screen with the sound of a motorcycle revving up. Soon, the darkness is pierced by the front lights of a motorcycle as it approaches the front of the screen. This cuts abruptly to Dabholkar explaining to a large audience the elements of a scientific temperament and how it is a founding principle of the Indian Constitution. He is abruptly cut off with the loud sounds of shots and the titles on the screen tell us of Dabholkar's assassination.

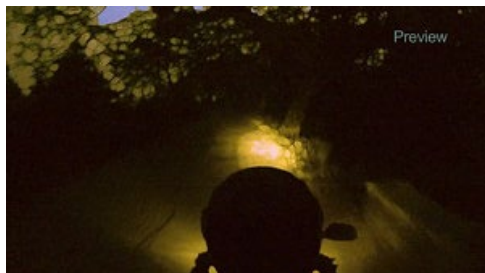
We hear the motorcycle rev up again as Pansare asks the crowd gathered at Dabholkar's memorial. He asks,

"Who will carry on Dabholkar's work?"

They reply,



Gobind Pansare at Dabholkar's memorial.



The motorcycle is on its way.



Posted by "Hindu National Army." Cover before the color saffron.



"We will! We will."

This time we find ourselves behind the motorcycle. But now we know already where it will end. Five gunshots ring out and we get archival News footage announcing the assassination of Gobind Pansare.

The gunshots also act as a bridge to another murder in public memory—to the shots that had riddled M.K. Gandhi's body on January 30, 1948. While Pansare says as much, the film will trace again and again with ever deepening analysis, that the killers of Dabholkar and Pansare are descendants of the same ideology that had killed Gandhi. Patwardhan will repeatedly challenge the self-presentation of the Hindutva brigades as the true nationalists, showing their version of the nation as deeply authoritarian, casteist and patriarchal.

The recurrent motif of the motorcycle and gunshots is one of the many poetic ways in which Patwardhan takes a reality and reveals larger historical patterns that we must learn to recognize not only with our brains, but also with our hearts and senses. We must, the film teaches us, sense as much as we must grasp an intellectual argument; and we must literally feel the pain of others and desire justice, equality, and freedom for all. Patwardhan alerts us to the convergence of symbols in the gathering clouds of fascism. The motorcycle is emblematic of a hit and run culture of terror whose seduction lies in its appeal to a youthful hypermasculinity built upon spectacular acts of violence and granted impunity by the State. We learn to discern the meaning of colors—whether saffron or red and blue[2]; the spirit of rallies—whether hierarchical or hopeful; and the ways in which street performances alter public spaces—whether to threaten into submission or to celebrate solidarity.

Later in the film, we will see men of the extremist group, the Hindu Rashtra Sena, in a self-promotional video riding their motorcycles with saffron flags. In voice-over, Dhananjay Desai, the group's founder proudly proclaims that his group is fascist. He explains,

"Fascism means brotherhood."

After seeing *Reason/Vivek*, I came across another self-promotional video of two of the most upwardly mobile, entrepreneurial, and favorite "holy" babas of the current regime, Sadhguru and Ramdev, going for a ride. This video is not in the film, but my point is that the film teaches you to recognize the patterns. The threat behind the smiling babas is unmistakably clear: to live in India you must cower before the color saffron carried by men out for the thrill of riding over those who stand in the way.

Due to the overarching ambition of what it confronts, *Reason/Vivek* paints, by necessity, on a wide canvas. Patwardhan traces the history of the BJP to the founding of the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) in the 1920s. Modelled openly on the Nazis, the RSS is a cadre-based organization that dreams of a complete social transformation into a Brahmanical social order. Its ideology is also known as Hindutva, and embraced by RSS and its affiliates, including its women's wings. The BJP is the political wing of the RSS and Modi is an RSS man.

The RSS describes itself as a cultural organization, but its understanding of culture is all encompassing, from how a child should be conceived to who has the right to exist and how. The current fixation on protecting the cow comes from this overall categorization of life, including animals, along caste lines. According to caste hierarchy, the cow is "pure" and the dog "impure." In other words, the RSS





Sadhguru takes Baba Ramdev on a ride.



Promotional video from the Isha Foundation (Sadhguru's organization). [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nATHGigW\\_n4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nATHGigW_n4)

is a cultural organization only in the sense that the Nazis were, with their notions of Aryan supremacy. Like the Nazis, RSS claims the right to determine existence along a homogenous, hierarchical order based on a predetermined system of “purity” based in birth.

Against this anti-democratic Hindutva ideology, Patwardhan shows another history and another dream. He traces it to the Enlightenment, and, before it, to Socrates and the Buddha, leading on to India's anti-colonial struggles and independence—up to the present. He does not recount this history chronologically, laying history brick by brick. Instead, we see the power of cinema to go back and forth in time, to hold memory, and to dream of a future. We have, for instance, been told in the film's opening of the murder of Pansare and Dhabolkar, but then we see them alive, working and living despite threats to their lives.



Gobind Pansare addressing a crowd.

Patwardhan takes us close to acute pain and suffering, but as an antidote to the sadistic horrors of the killers' videos. He takes us, for instance, to the home of Mohammed Akhlaq, the Muslim man who was lynched to death in his own home by a mob in Dadri, Uttar Pradesh on September 28, 2015. We meet Akhlaq's son, Mohammad Sartaj who is in the Air Force. From him, we hear a life story of rising out of poverty through sheer hard work and his desire to free his father from the back-breaking labor that man had endured to educate his son. We have heard this autobiographical narrative before in the film. We heard it from Mohammed Sadiq, whose son Mohsin Sadiq, a young computer engineer, was beaten to death by members of the Hindu Rashtra Sena. Mohsin was the sole breadwinner for his entire family.

And, we will hear about the grief of children and parents again—this time summarized as class analysis. Kanhaiya Kumar, a student leader, is responding to the charge that student protesters are anti-national, unlike the soldiers laying down their lives on the border. He begins by reminding his audience of the scant regard the Indian state has shown to the increasing death toll of farmer suicides. [3] Kumar explains, the farmer who commits suicide because he cannot pay his loans is the father of the man who fights on the border:





The farmer who toils on the land is my father.

“The famer is my father; the soldier, my brother.”



My own brother enlists in the army and dies.



So don't create this false binary and fake debate.

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



RSS rally in Pune.

Tying these vignettes together, Patwardhan ends the isolation of the victim, mounting instead a thorough critique of the conditions that produce this unbearable sorrow and those who benefit from it.

We can now understand the profound threat that intellectuals like Kalburgi, Dabholkar, Pansare, and Lankesh had posed—and their courage in opposing the current regime. Patwardhan analyzes the attacks on universities as

- economic (through privatization and declining state funding),
- cultural (installing extremist right wing administrators, changing curriculum along Hindutva ideology, and flouting democratic processes of academic life), and
- existential (students and professors harassed, roughed up, sometimes in the presence of the police, and an entire university, like JNU, declared anti-national).



In the memory of Rohith Vemula.

The film traces the suicide of the Dalit student activist, Rohith Vemula and the continuing resistance of his mother and brother. Patwardhan links the bid to crush the university and education system to Brahmanical domination. After all, it was a crime for a Dalit to read, a crime punishable by death.

The extent to which the Hindu Right has armed itself and has penetrated into State institutions, including government and police, comes into sharp relief with Patwardhan's investigations into the suspicious death of Hemant Karkare, Commissioner of Police, Maharashtra, during the terrorist attacks in Bombay in November 2008. Through interviews and archival footage, Patwardhan uncovers that Karkare had traced the bomb attacks in Bombay between 2002-2008 to the Hindu Right. Coming as it does, two-thirds into the film, this part brings together what we have seen so far—the assassinations and lynchings, the assaults on public institutions like universities and the justice system, and the complicity of the media machine—to the unmistakable conclusion that India is descending into fascism.

We are taken to spectacular rallies of the Hindu right and their rewriting of India's history as a myth of ancient Hindu greatness that was crushed by "foreign invasions" by Muslim (not British) rulers. The BJP's promises to restore India to

this former glory, a new militarized India on the offensive—a global power. In an astounding range of shots, from wide angles of crowds, to the spectacles on stage, to interviews with the attendees, Patwardhan reveals the mix of docility and virulent aggression that characterizes the men and women aligned with Hindutva.



A saffron parade.

These fantastic displays of power are shown seeping into everyday life. We return from the RSS rally to a Mumbai suburb where the Shiv Sena has changed the name of a local train station from Oshiwara to the Hindutva obsession, Ram Mandir (Ram temple). Benign, smiling middle-class, middle-aged men tell Patwardhan,

“Now, whether they like it or not everyone will have to say the name of Ram.”

Attentive to small detail, Patwardhan shows the unfolding of this totalitarian vision. We see Muslim men under the Ram Mandir sign, waiting for the train.



The Shiv Sena government changes the name of the Oshiwara station in Bombay to Ram Mandir.



"Even those who don't want to will utter Ram's name."



"We are probing all angles."

## Documentary and poetry

*Vivek/Reason* has a liveness that makes it gripping; it stands in the midst of a sweeping change whose outcome is a matter of life and death. Literally, anything can happen and the camera is a witness and provocateur. This is also classic Patwardhan. We see him, camera in hand, going into the Kolhapur Police Commissioner's office, asking why no arrests have been made, three months after Pansare was killed. As is to be expected, the officer replies that they are looking into it, etc., etc...

However, the camera does not fixate on the officer. It meanders over the symbols





As is typical of government offices, Gandhi's and Ambedkar's portrait hang on the office walls.



The camera notes the four lionheads on the Ashoka pillar (a Buddhist symbol that is India's national emblem, signifying peace) outside the Commissioner's office.

of liberal democracy that line the commissioner's office, indicating both the coldly impersonal, ritualistic nature of these displays and their ironic historical importance. Thus, the scene lifts us above a literal presentation of what is in front of the camera. Instead, the camera becomes a tool of discovery. Patwardhan shows us, not just another "bad" police officer caught on camera, but rather a state of democracy in which another history is silenced.





There is a profoundly poignant moment on camera, which I think holds the overall tenor of the film—blending the pain and hope of these times. Patwardhan is interviewing Shaila Dabholkar after her husband has been killed. Shaila Dabholkar is describing her first meeting with her husband and for some reason Patwardhan has to stop and restart the interview. We hear him apologize off screen:

"Sorry *tai* (elder sister), but could you please repeat your last sentence again? Sorry! Sorry!"

What follows is a moment of such deep reflection of loss and recovery on a human face that time stops—before it picks up again.

Shaila Dabholkar first gently laughs off the interruption. She reassures Patwardhan that it is ok. Then, in what is perhaps a reminder to herself as well as recognition of the importance of what Patwardhan is doing, she remarks that these days everything is for her husband. But then, she cannot just go on—and in the quietest possible way asks for a minute to compose herself.

Here is a moment that a painter might not be able to depict in one still image, but a poet could. For a poet takes a concrete experience and then distills it, immersing it back into the river of time. How do you show the passing of a moment in which grief rises to the surface and is then made private again? How do you show the moment in which the personal yields to the political? There is affection and regard here between the filmmaker and his subject—and solidarity. This tender moment is as clear an indication of where Patwardhan stands as are the instances of confrontation or investigation we see him engage in. It is also an instance of profound beauty—of human dignity and love in its many forms. What a contrast to the smashing of human dignity we see in the language and imagery of the ultra-right.

	
It's ok.	You know how it is now...anything for Doctor.
	
	Give me a minute.

The film's title *Vivek* is only loosely translated as reason. Derived from Sanskrit,



Sartaj, in the face of brutality, asserts his love for the Indian people.



Shaista, his sister, was witness to the brutal killing of her father and brother and is still in shock.



with versions in different languages, for example *bibek* in Bengali, *vivek* means the wisdom to discern between right and wrong—to seek the truth. Thus, Sikhs pray for *vivek daan*, i.e., the gift of wisdom, in the *ardaas*, the prayer which accompanies the start or end of a task. It is *vivek*, the wisdom of the heart and intellect, that Patwardhan brings to us through his interviews with those who struggle against the gathering storm and are paying the price for its cruel desires.

We see *vivek* in the resolute gentleness of Mohammed Akhlaq's son, Sartaj. With his father dead and younger brother brutally beaten and fighting for his life in hospital, Sartaj says, "I am fortunate to be born in this country. There is love among the people" and "only a handful of people" are destroying its fabric. Interviewed in the bare home of a metalsmith who had educated his son to join the Air Force, Sartaj recounts how he had wanted to pull his father out of this hard life. His sister, who had witnessed the horror looks on, her eyes still seared by shock.

In the face of such needless cruelty and sorrow, *Vivek/Reason* gives us some achingly quiet moments to grieve. We have been told of the brutal lynching of Mohammed Akhlaq in Dadri. But before his son Sartaj begins to speak of his father, the screen holds the image of a metalsmith's tongs holding a red-hot piece of iron over fire. These quiet shots prepare us to listen to Sartaj's testimony and are also a metaphor—of the fire of poverty and honest labor through which Akhlaq, a metalsmith, had molded his children and the fire they have now been thrust into. Shaped by a hard life and a father's love, they will, we hope, withstand this attack. It is also a fire that we, the viewers, must face. We have come to this scene after we have just witnessed young Dalit men, beaten up laying in hospital beds, as they return from a large protest rally.



Before Sartaj recounts his childhood, we see a metalsmith's firing kiln.

This is how the documentary becomes poetic. It takes something from the world itself and grants it meaning and significance, both as a metaphor and analysis. In another instance, walking along in Hemant Karkare's funeral procession, the camera notes not only the hypocrisy of the State honors but also the flowers that fall on the wayside. Humbly the flowers pay their homage to a brave and honest police officer who had upheld his duty to the Constitution, i.e., to pursue justice equally for all citizens. The flowers are also a metaphor for memory, gathered by the camera for the resistance that has to continue after Karkare's death.

The fire and the flowers remind me of the great Marxist poet, Faiz Ahmed Faiz's lines:

"Yuhin hamesha ulajhati rahi hai zulm se khalq  
Na unki rasm nai hai, na apni reet nai  
Yuhin hamesha khilaye hain humne aag mein phool  
Na unki haar nai hai na apni jeet nai"

"Always like this, the people have struggled with the tyrants  
Neither have they changed their rituals and nor have we





Hemant Karkare's funeral procession.



The drummers wear headbands, carrying the words, "I am Gauri."



The sign, "I am Gauri" is widely seen at the rally.



Always like this, we have blossomed flowers in fire  
Neither is their defeat new and nor is our victory"

*Vivek/Reason* gathers and repeats—like people's protest songs do—lessons from history that build hope for the future. Against the short-term grandiose predictions of Hindutva and their apocalyptic visions, *Vivek/Reason* presents the continuity of memory, remembered in songs and poetry. If we are shown Sanatan Sansthan's declaration that India will become a Hindu Rashtra (nation) in 2023 (the prediction is made in 2013), we also hear Sheetal Sathe and Nikam sing of the struggle for equality and justice. We hear Uttam Kamble recite Baburao Bagul at Gobind Pansare's memorial:

"You existed before the vedas  
You existed even before the god of the vedas  
You named the sun, so it Sun it became  
You named the moon, so Moon it became  
You named everything in the universe  
And it was you who named the gods."

He then asks, "Who is this person the poem speaks of?" His face glowing with love and admiration for the beauty of these lines, Kambale gives the answer: the human.

Ultimately, the film's quietness comes from the unyielding courage of the people it portrays. The courage also comes from memory of previous struggles and sacrifices and the conviction, in Pansare's words, which also end the film, that as long as inequality exists people will rise up. As the end credits roll, we are at a rally commemorating Gauri Lankesh. At the center are drummers beating a fierce rhythm; a call to unite, to stay true to the memory of Gauri. The drummers wear headbands, carrying the words, "I am Gauri."

The film could have ended at the drumbeats, but Patwardhan does not leave us there. He surprises with another ending. With the drums still beating, the scene changes to a street with Pansare coming up on it. Then, the drums fade out and the last words are Pansare's:

"In the philosophy I follow, a basic aspect is the inevitability of success. It has little to do with our desires. At no stage in world history was disparity as great as it is today. This inequity will not allow humans to rest. People will rise up to fight it. And, step by step, step by step humans will progress. It will happen. It is no dream. And, dreaming is no sin."

It is difficult to put into words the effect of this last sequence. We know that Pansare is dead, yet we have an image of him as alive—and he lives on in our struggles. Here, in cinema, Patwardhan echoes Sheetal Sathe revolutionary singing, invoking the power of memory and hope in struggles for justice. She sings,

"Even if they destroy the body, they cannot destroy the thought  
Oh religious mercenaries, can you stop the wheel of progress?"



Pansare lives on in our struggles.



"This inequity won't allow human beings to rest."



"People will rise up to fight it."



"It will happen. It's no dream."

## An epic documentary

Through the course of this film, we meet many people—some whose lives are personally interconnected and others connected by their principles and the times they live in. Patwardhan takes us into the homes of some, interviews others in public places, and pieces life narratives as well as the context by assembling existing footage. We meet Gobind and Uma Pansare, M.M. Kalburgi, Narendra and Shaila Dabholkar, Gauri Lankesh, Rohith Vemula, Radhika Vemula, Raja Vemula, Mohammad Sartaj, Mohammed Sadiq, Hemant Karkare, S.M. Mushrif, Sheela Sathe, Nikam, Sharmila and Saurabh Lotlikar, and many others in what is best described as an epic documentary.

Here, Patwardhan taps into a South Asian genre born, perhaps, out of the trauma of Partition, which tore apart families and neighborhoods and forced the migration of fifteen million people with more than one million estimated dead. This is the epic historical narrative. Abdullah Hussein's Urdu novel, *The Weary Generations*, first published in 1963 attempted such an epic narrative, covering the three decades leading up to the Partition. This is before Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981). The sense of the individual as historical, with outcomes inextricably tied to the times, and the interconnection between people runs through these epic narratives. Like epics, these stories are never-ending, because they are stories of a society, not only individuals. If we understand all history as class struggle, then this form comes closest to representing history as never finished, until humanity itself is. History in this conception is always being made and we can never fully predict the outcomes of our actions—future transformations change our understanding of the past. However, to narrate such a story in fiction is one thing, to bring it to life on the screen in documentary form is an extraordinary achievement. I cannot think of another film that approaches this one in its attention to both the macro and the individual; that is so present in everyday struggle and aware of history; and that portrays the democratic spirit as an intense desire for a dignified life for all.

On February 18, 1943, as the Germans were losing the war, Goebels gave what is known as the "total war speech," where he asked,

"Do you want the war to be still more total, more radical than we can imagine it today?"

This is a call for war for its own sake—without limits as an end in itself. The role of media in such a total war is no longer to distort reality, to create fake news, but rather to destroy the notion of reality itself. It rides on the delusion of complete power where anything in its way must be destroyed. Such a mind is trapped in the immediate; it is addicted to the thrill of murder; and stoked by ever more destruction. It is no wonder that it is drawn to cinema—now easily carried in the palm of one's hand—to create and circulate images of obliteration of the world we know. There is, perhaps, nothing more real for a species than itself. That the annihilation of the other that has become ordinary is a sign that we are losing grip over reality.

The antidote to this imaginary also lies with cinema but one where reality can be pulled out of this immediate state of terror and given meaning by a sense of justice and solidarity amongst people. Clearly, *Reason/Vivek* is the result of a sustained lifetime of commitment, of living a life in solidarity with the subjects of the film. Each of Patwardhan's films have been politically committed, he has seen them as means of organizing, and himself as part of a movement. Music and poetry have run through them all. But, perhaps, this is the most poetic of all. Maybe, the times call for it. As India enters Modi's second term, the grip of frenzied devotion to authoritarian spectacles has tightened. It continues in lumpen sadistic violence against others and in masochistic displays of craven self-humiliation by "intellectuals" in front of Modi. We will need *Vivek/Reason* to keep democracy alive; and we will need revolutionary poetry to remind us that

change is both necessary and inevitable. The evidence that *Reason/Vivek* is working is that the establishment has tried to stop the film from being screened and failed. It was screened at the International Documentary and Short Film Festival, Kerala in June 2019; the court over-riding the delaying tactics of the Information and Broadcasting Ministry against its screening. Patwardhan's 1992 film, *In the name of Ram* has become a protest event and rally in universities, with screenings in Delhi, Kolkatta, and Hyderabad. The documentary filmmaker as a maker and keeper of history has never been so necessary.

Sheetal Sathe's revolutionary singing: "Even if they destroy the body ...	... they cannot destroy the thought.
O religious mercenaries ...	... can you stop the wheel of progress?"

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## Notes

1. At the core of this “Hindu nation” is the caste system which categorizes every aspect of life, from birth to death, from the living to non-living, along a caste hierarchy. Uma Chakravarti (1993) has described it as *Brahmanical patriarchy*, a social system where caste “purity” is maintained by controlling women’s sexuality. Inherently undemocratic, the ideology divides up the nation into insider and outsider groups, second class or even non-citizens based on birth in the caste hierarchy, religion, or gender. Caste is the basis of Hindutva’s totalitarian perspective. It abolishes the public/private distinction as it governs all aspects of life, from birth to death. Its intensification, under the BJP, Patwardhan shows, is intrinsically connected to the neoliberal project pushing it over into fascism.

[\[return to page 1\]](#)

2. Saffron is the color of Hinudtva; red of the communists; and blue represents Dalit liberation.

3. From 2016, the Indian state stopped releasing figures of farmer suicides. See P Sainath on the agrarian crisis: <https://psainath.org/in-india-farmers-face-a-terrifying-crisis/>

## Bibliography

Chakravarti, Uma. 1993. "Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State." *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 28 (No. 14): 579-585.

Mukul Kesavan is a historian and writer whose recent articles are very helpful in understanding contemporary history and the nature of Modi’s appeal. These can be found in the *Telegraph*, *New York Times* and others.







The introductory clip to Vogue Empower's My Choice Video.



Lust is symbolized through women licking their lips.

## The neoliberal feminist gaze: contesting “female empowerment” narratives in contemporary Bollywood films

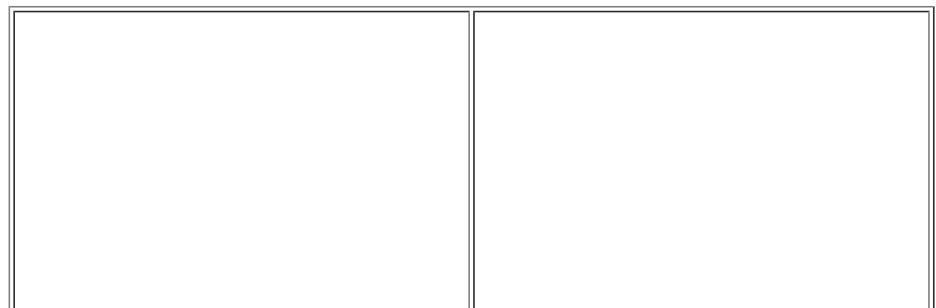
by [Mallika Khanna](#)

### “My Choice” — commodification and the “empowered Indian woman”

In 2015, an ongoing, heated debate over the limitations of contemporary Indian feminism turned vicious. YouTube saw the release of the infamous “My Choice” video (*VOGUE India*, 2015), featuring Deepika Padukone—Bollywood darling and, not coincidentally, one of the ten highest paid actresses in the world. The short film presents a series of shots of women as a voiceover by Deepika reels off lines designed to empower and invigorate female viewers:

“My choice. To marry or not to marry, to have sex before marriage, to have sex outside of marriage, to not have sex. My choice.”

Despite its lack of dialogue and plot, “My Choice” captures a narrative arc through visual and auditory spectacle. The two-and-a-half minute film begins with slow shots cutting between a seemingly heterogenous group of 99 women. The music is somber, ominous. The women are restrained in self-presentation at first, one clutching her knees to her chest, another holding a sheet up to hide her body. As the music beat picks up, the women begin twirling, smiling, looking coyly into the camera. A woman licking her lips connotes lust, *bindis* and rings connote tradition. As the music builds to a crescendo, Deepika speaks: “My pleasure may be your pain, my songs, your noise.” The women become angry. Deepika holds her head between her hands, others punch their fists towards the camera. A woman in black dances with fluid, bold movements, in a musical crescendo. Stop. The music returns to its original upbeat pace and once again the women are smiling, gentle, appeased. The last shot features Deepika looking straight into the camera, her hair blowing effortlessly in a manner that only the most elegantly placed wind machine could enable. She proclaims: “I am the universe. Infinite in every direction. This, is my choice.”

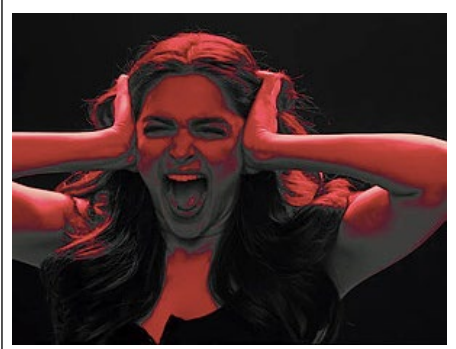




Vogue India's Empower campaign caters to the gaze of the "empowered independent woman"—an imagined spectator set firmly in the urban elite.



Tradition is embodied through a Bindi on her forehead.



Deepika holds her head and screams as the music picks up, symbolizing women's rage.



A woman in black dances, driving the music to its peak.



The music slows. Deepika's smile signals the end of the narrative arc. The women are unchained, empowerment as been achieved.

Even without a plot or characterization, the film manages to display resplendent female triumph. From reserved to raging to vindicated, the women in “My Choice” are portrayed as having agency over their own stories, as the title of the video suggests. These women fight the system and come out unscathed—the women, the title implies, we can all choose to become.

Within hours of the video's release, comments flooded in on YouTube accusing “My Choice” of being “sexist hypocrisy,” and a “cancer which will destroy Indian society.” Criticism ranged across the spectrum: that it was too elitist, that its production by *Vogue India*, a magazine known for its promotion of unrealistic beauty standards, represented a hypocritical double standard, that its message was selfish rather than liberating.

“My Choice,” produced by *Vogue India* as a part of their #VogueEmpower campaign, provides a fraught, contentious example of the exclusion and hypocrisy facilitated by profit-motivated ventures' hijacking of mainstream Indian

feminism. For example, Swetha, a contributor to *Feminism in India*, a (self-evidently) feminist blog writes:

“In recent times, it is a fad to sell to the *empowered independent woman*. Having clearly positioned itself as a magazine for women, *Vogue* also decided to use the feminist movement as a marketing tool. However, this just dilutes a movement that is trying hard to include everybody and focus on real world issues. These campaigns harm the purpose of feminism by saying things we don’t wish to say... The campaigns are structured in a way that focuses on who is speaking instead of what is being said.” (Swetha)



Product placement for Coke in Subhash Ghai's *Taal*.

The “empowered independent woman” has become something of a feminist trope in contemporary India. She can afford to buy the feminism that cultural productions like *Vogue* are selling; she demands to see her aspirations represented and fulfilled in the commodities she buys. This desirable consumer does not wish to see women who are quiet, women who acquiesce, women who fail. She looks for roaring triumphs, overt challenges to the patriarchy and for choices that affirm liberation.

Nowhere is this new woman more visible than in the goals of the contemporary Hindi film industry. An industry that has felt global disdain, criticized for its escapist fantasies, is steadily shedding that older image by championing films that embrace a certain kind of realism, often tinged with social critique. This new iteration of the industry, “Bollywood,” now tries to cater to an urban elite consumer, relegating the “masses” to B or C grade status (Ganti). And a whole genre, christened “women-centric” films, has been created to service the desires of the “empowered independent woman,” whose income has become a driving force for the filmmaking industry (Jha).



Queen's Rani enjoying her newfound “empowerment” in Paris.

Analyzing three films from this genre, I will examine the growing prioritization of a narrative trope about the “empowered independent woman” in contemporary Bollywood. Through *Angry Indian Goddesses* (Pan Nalin, 2015) (henceforth *Angry*) and *Veere di Wedding* (Shashanka Ghosh 2018) (henceforth *Veere*), I investigate the impact of what I term the “neoliberal feminist gaze.” While both films offer faithful renderings of the “empowered independent woman” and her expectations, they inhabit different spaces in Indian media, proving just how widely these expectations have permeated. *Angry*, the earlier of the two, primarily had an international audience in mind, and as a niche film, it did far better on the international film festival circuit than in India. The more recent *Veere* signals a shift in mainstream Bollywood, which has now embraced the women-centric genre with full-force, as is evident from its 100-crore (approximately 14.3 million dollars) box office revenue despite having no mainstream male lead.



Raazi's Sehmat plays a spy for the Indian army who must make the tough choice of putting her nation before love.

To establish a contrast with these films, through a third film, *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (Alankrita Srivastava, 2016) (henceforth *Lipstick*), I suggest the existence of an alternative: women-centric filmmaking that evades the demands of the neoliberal feminist gaze. I argue that a film like *Lipstick*, which allows its women to be weak and to fail while still ascribing them value, expands the ambit of the very idea of “woman,” giving a voice to women marginalized not just by the patriarchy, but also by neoliberalism.

## Indian feminism: an historical overview

The trope of the “empowered independent woman” comes packaged with a





Blank Noise Collective, an organization working on making public spaces in urban India safer for women, staging a protest against street harassment.

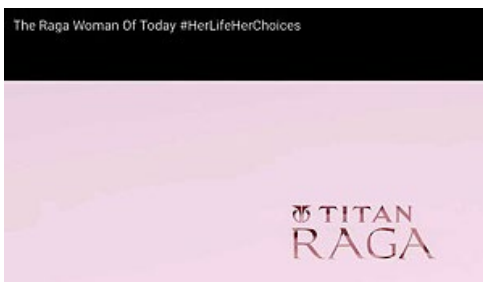
**I Never Ask For It**  
NO EXCUSE FOR SEXUAL VIOLENCE  
ACTION HEROES UNITE TO ERADICATE VICTIM BLAME

ACTION HEROES NAME	TIME	AGE	PLACE	CLOTHES	CAUSED BY	HOW HAPPENED?	MY RESPONSE	LEADER FOR...
Ujjwal Singh	4:30 pm	24	Patna	Saree	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh
Ujjwal Singh	5:00 pm	21	Patna	Saree	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh
Ujjwal Singh	5:30 pm	22	Patna	Saree	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh
Ujjwal Singh	6:00 pm	23	Patna	Saree	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh
Ujjwal Singh	6:30 pm	24	Patna	Saree	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh
Ujjwal Singh	7:00 pm	25	Patna	Saree	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh
Ujjwal Singh	7:30 pm	26	Patna	Saree	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh
Ujjwal Singh	8:00 pm	27	Patna	Saree	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh
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Ujjwal Singh	9:30 pm	30	Patna	Saree	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh
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Ujjwal Singh	10:30 pm	32	Patna	Saree	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh
Ujjwal Singh	11:00 pm	33	Patna	Saree	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh
Ujjwal Singh	11:30 pm	34	Patna	Saree	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh
Ujjwal Singh	12:00 am	35	Patna	Saree	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh
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Ujjwal Singh	2:00 pm	63	Patna	Saree	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh
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Ujjwal Singh	12:30 am	84	Patna	Saree	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh
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Ujjwal Singh	2:00 am	87	Patna	Saree	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh
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Ujjwal Singh	3:00 am	89	Patna	Saree	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh
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Ujjwal Singh	6:00 am	95	Patna	Saree	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh
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Ujjwal Singh	7:30 am	98	Patna	Saree	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh
Ujjwal Singh	8:00 am	99	Patna	Saree	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh
Ujjwal Singh	8:30 am	100	Patna	Saree	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh	Ujjwal Singh

[caption??]



Cover picture for the Why Loiter Campaign, another movement to make urban public spaces less hostile to women.



Titan Raga's "Her Life, Her Choices" features

steadily growing form of feminist activism, stemming from India's neoliberal turn in the 1990s. Hemangini Gupta documents this emergent "entrepreneurial" feminism through reporting on recent social movements like the Blank Noise Campaign[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)], an organized campaign against street sexual harassment in urban areas around India:

"Recent forms of gender organizing in India suggest an imperative for individuals to 'take responsibility' for themselves and to 'be action-heroes,' as the Blank Noise initiatives encourage, or 'not to play victim' (which suggests passivity) as the organizer of The Friday Convent[2] explained. While both groups cannot be conflated, they express an understanding of neoliberal entrepreneurial self-making that foregrounds citizenship and consumption... Emergent forms of entrepreneurial activism work on the self to cultivate action—heroes that are immediately responsive to women's own imaginations and desires for the public spaces that they inhabit." (Gupta 164)

*Vogue's* Empower campaign, represented in the "My Choice" video, comes out of this neoliberal entrepreneurial fervor:

"middle class women formulating a neoliberal feminism [who] assume individual responsibility to transform public spaces by emphasizing their personal desires and dreams as the basis for their articulation of feminist freedom." (Gupta 165)

Contemporary India's shift to neoliberal feminism is a particularly drastic one within the women's movement. As Alka Kurian explains, Indian feminism has historically been a socialist endeavor in which the empowerment of the individual has often been sacrificed to fight for the empowerment of marginalized communities:

"The first wave of the Indian women's movement is understood to have begun during the nineteenth-century social reform movement with women's organizations battling against both patriarchy and colonialism. The second wave of women's political activism in the post-colonial India of 1950s and 1960s took on a radically different form and method of mobilizing and embodied class and anti-caste struggles. These included tribal landless laborers' movement against feudal oppression, rallies against price rise, black marketeering and corruption, formation of trade unions for women working in the informal sector, and agitation for land by landless peasants. The third wave of the Indian women's movement that grew in late 1970s was self-consciously feminist at its core. Deliberately sidestepping party affiliation and hierarchies, this 'autonomous' women's movement led agitations against dowry oppression and custodial rape... However, the anti-rape campaign championed by the IWM [Indian Women's Movement] was far too sporadic and episodic for it to be transformed into a genuine civil rights issue...

"The 1990s NGO-ization and careerism of the autonomous women's organizations owing to sudden influx of donor funding, along with people's inexplicable detachment from political and civic life undermined the essence of a genuine feminist movement in India after it peaked in 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s. Further, the arrival of governance feminism, i.e. the incorporation of feminist knowledge within state, led to a greater policing and monitoring of citizens, especially of women, viewed by the regressive, neo-liberal state as

ads in which women make decisions challenging patriarchal traditions in India.



Comedian Radhika Vaz appears completely naked in FabAlley's Unfollow ad, performing a routine in which she questions expectations surrounding what women should wear to appear professional, attractive or respectable.



Priyanka Chopra in Bumble's #EqualNotLoose campaign plays the "empowered independent woman" who makes choices like running in her sports bra at the gym and working instead of cooking.

vulnerable and passive victims (Kapur 2014; Iyer 2015)...." (Kurian 62)

Kurian's analysis reveals two important things. First, feminism in India has historically been deeply intersectional and community-oriented. The second wave was particularly so, meaning that questions of choice and individual agency went largely ignored. Second, the turn to neoliberalism in the 90s came intertwined with a deep nationalistic paternalism that infantilized women, turning them into wards of the State. The corresponding protectionist rhetoric combined with a new neoliberal entrepreneurialism led to push-back from women. They now demanded new forms of individual autonomy: freedom of movement, desire, aesthetics. The individual body became a locus upon which questions of choice—earlier disavowed in service of the larger community development movement—were inflected.

The shift from a development rhetoric to an individualistic one was inevitably class-based. Middle to upper-middle class urban women who were in the privileged position of being relatively unaffected by poverty, religious discrimination and casteism led this movement towards individual freedom and choice. Consequently, expression of "personal desires and dreams" became the benchmark by which women's empowerment across India was measured. Now, culturally and economically, by virtue of having significant disposable incomes, these women have become the key demographic at which ads and campaigns like "My Choice" are aimed.

As Kurian calls it, to dismiss such a movement reclaiming female bodily autonomy and desires simply because it is led by the privileged classes "smacks of exclusionary elitism." Certainly, movements mediated by the privileged have long had their own revolutionary potential, particularly if they take up the causes of minorities. Unfortunately, this has largely not been the case in contemporary mainstream Indian feminism. Expressing opposition to abandoning socialist perspectives, widespread resistance to exclusionary choice feminism is now seen across social media, where minority women express their ideas more directly. Yet mainstream pop culture continues to prioritize the neoliberal feminist, whose desires and choices seemingly take precedence above all else, consequently disavowing the wider Indian women's movement whose development agenda has lost currency.

## "Women-centric" films

In her book, *Feminism in India*, Maitrayee Chaudhuri writes:

"Liberalization brought in its turn a public discourse redolent with ideas of 'choice'... A central consequence of this is the primacy of lifestyle and its inevitability for the individual agent... In India, .. the association [between lifestyle and consumerism] is obvious.. The corporate sector, advertising copywriters, management gurus and media barons worked towards the dissemination of a concept of *selfhood* defined by *choice* and consumption..." (my italicization) (Chaudhuri 271)

As Chaudhuri highlights, choice, selfhood and consumption have become deeply intertwined in contemporary Indian media. The post-liberalization iteration of feminism has produced a distinct class of consumers for whom individualized choices have taken primacy over all else. This identity has been latched onto by brands across the spectrum—for example, with consumer goods behemoth Titan spearheading a "her life, her choices" campaign (Titan Watches), fashion brand FabAlley releasing an ad that shows comedian Radhika Vaz deliver a scathing critique of the need to conform to fashion trends all the while naked (Radhika Vaz Comedy), and, most recently, global dating app Bumble, launching its app in India with the #equalnotloose campaign featuring "independent, modern women" who take choice into their own hands (Stanley).

This transformation came hand-in-hand with the government's granting Bollywood industry status in 1998; later in 2000, "filmmaking or the 'entertainment industry' was recognized as an 'approved activity' under 'industrial concerns.'" (Ganti 150) The streamlining and industrialization of Bollywood led to a shift away from government's considering it a social tool to seeing it as a potential vehicle for economic growth. Its industry status officially created new avenues for financing, from banks and corporations to industrial houses and the stock market. Thus a film sector once intertwined with socialist aspirations of national development, encouraged by the State, became an entirely consumer-driven industry motivated largely by profit (Ganti).[3]

With a keen eye on the market, this new iteration of Bollywood has been responsive to social trends in an unprecedented way. When neoliberal entrepreneurialism reinvigorated and commodified Indian feminism, filmmakers were quick to sniff out this new category of spectator: the "empowered independent woman." As a new genre of "women-centric" films emerged around the turn of the decade, films like *The Dirty Picture*, *Kahaani*, *Neerja*, *Tanu Weds Manu Returns*, *Mary Kom*, *Queen*, *Raazi* all were released post-2010, right around the time social media took off in India in a big way. This new crop of films explore far ranging themes from motherhood to careerism to arranged marriages to sexual desire, abuse, abortion and sacrifice. Yet the diversity of themes does not mean a diversity of protagonists. The main female characters in these films echo the identity of the "empowered independent woman." From the ditzy Punjabi Rani in *Queen* to the patriotic Sehmat in *Raazi*, these protagonists almost ubiquitously make controversial choices and fight to break out of conventional molds of Indian femininity. This aspirational feminist ideal comes hand in hand with what I term the neoliberal feminist gaze.

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## The neoliberal feminist gaze



The *Angry Indian Goddesses* in a club in Goa for a bachelorette party.



The “*Veeres*” at a wedding return from Phuket “empowered” by their brief escape.



The women of *Lipstick* are not “empowered” and capable of making choices that subvert patriarchal norms without consequences. They fail the demands of the neoliberal feminist gaze.

I derive a concept here of the neoliberal feminist gaze from Laura Mulvey’s concept of the “male gaze.” Mulvey’s appropriation of the Lacanian gaze is deeply rooted in psychoanalytic film criticism that takes sexual difference along a binary as a prerequisite. Since Mulvey introduced the idea of the gaze to film theory, several filmmakers and scholars have reworked the idea of the gaze in film theory to conceptualize a “female gaze” (bell hooks, Zoe Dirse, Paula Marantz Cohen). Yet, forced to reckon with new frameworks that challenge the primacy of a psychoanalytic gender binary, there seems to be little consensus among these theorists on what films made using the female gaze look like.

I argue that just as gender itself is culturally constructed, understandings of a female gaze must necessarily change across cultures. Here I limit my analysis to contemporary Bollywood, where a new crop of films are producing a normative Indian female spectator who has become the imagined audience for “women-centric” films. Post 2010, this spectator is urban, middle- to upper-middle and upper caste and Hindu, but not conspicuously so. More often than not, she is career-driven, speaks English, is in touch with Western media and pop culture, and has some awareness of feminist ideas, even if she doesn’t identify as a feminist.

By all accounts, this spectator’s singular desire is to see herself represented on screen: representing “reality” as a theme comes up over and over in interviews with filmmakers and actors who claim to be offering up “realistic” versions of “young urban working women” (Film Companion). The protagonist catering to this spectator is usually in the same socio-economic position as her off-screen counterpart. Her privileged position enables the character to exercise choice, creating the illusion of an aspirational feminist ideal. The arc of women’s empowerment consists of this: female protagonists make bold choices that liberate them from traditional patriarchal norms. It’s a fantasy for the imagined spectator.

The most recognizable trope of these “women centric” films is the protagonist’s journey towards “empowerment.” This does not necessarily mean a happy ending (although often the script has one). It means that through some deus ex machina, the protagonist resolves seemingly unresolvable problems, wins against her oppressors and faces no consequences for her otherwise socially unacceptable actions. This triumph often comes packaged with a large dose of escapism. Thus, in *Angry Indian Goddesses*, the woman jet off to Goa for a bachelorette party; in *Queen*, Rani travels to Paris and Amsterdam after being rejected by her fiancé; in *Veere*, the women friends fly off to Phuket after a fight. Notably, these protagonists spend very little time in domestic spaces. We almost never see these women in stereotypical gendered roles: cooking, cleaning, caring for family. Most often, we don’t see them in the home at all.

This subversion of tradition offers a legitimate and much-needed antidote to Bollywood’s deeply gendered and patriarchal tradition. Yet any notion that these films depict the “reality” of Indian womanhood is a stretch. These films offer up one version of womanhood—that of the “empowered independent woman,” whose gaze disavows cultural productions featuring women who are not in the position to make bold choices fighting the patriarchy. The neoliberal feminist gaze is thus determinedly exclusionary; screenwriters enamored by “strong female figures” insisting on producing triumphs for a seemingly feminist cause.

I would not vilify this version of India's women-centric filmmaking. There is in fact a place for these films in contemporary India, where "tradition" and a colonially mediated "modernity" do clash, with the latter creating a new place for women in the workplace, in positions of power and along the route to upward social mobility. I do want to warn that if this genre were to successfully represent the realities of women, as filmmakers and audiences alike claim it does, the ambit of "woman" must be broadened to make space for those whose identity falls outside this narrow sphere of the "empowered independent woman."

Through analyzing *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, I offer a version of such an alternative: filmmaking that acknowledges women who are not "empowered" or independent, who still often must rely on men for upward social mobility. This disruption can be jarring to neoliberal feminists, who may look upon other women who cannot make brave choices subverting tradition as submitting to the patriarchy. In this regard, Ranjona Banerji, reviewing *Lipstick* for *The Wire*, writes:

"As a feminist statement, [*Lipstick under my Burkha*] is something of a tragedy... sadly for me as an ageing feminist, [it] took me back a few decades because it did not even hint that [strong] women exist. Instead, the women [in the film] behaved the way men for millennia have been telling us women behave, without courage and honour. To me that is patronising patriarchy at its worst." (Banerji)

Banerji's critique repeats the expectation embedded in the neoliberal feminist gaze: she looks for a film about women that features women who are strong feminist icons, fighting the patriarchy with unbridled rage. The women of *Lipstick* "behav[ing] without courage and honour" seem as disruptive to this feminist narrative as do women dancing licentiously in Bollywood item songs so as to indulge the male gaze. In seeking models for empowerment, the neoliberal feminist gaze sets about producing a new hierarchy: one that places the woman equipped with the power of choice on a pedestal, in the process disavowing the woman who cannot socially display such overt expressions of empowerment. Such a hierarchization ensures that the most marginalized continue to remain invisible, even as the "empowered independent woman" shouts for women's voices to be heard.

### "Be free, express yourself": *Angry Indian Goddesses'* feminism by the elite, for the elite

*Angry Indian Goddesses* (2015) features five college girlfriends from different metropolises in India going to Goa — Western tourist and liberal haven—to celebrate their friend's impending wedding. The five women—Frieda, "the bride," Mad, the "singer," Pam, the "cooped up housewife," Suranjana, the "uptight businesswoman" and Jo, the "aspiring actress"—all share largely similar experiences of being female in the urban liberal sphere.

The film takes shape through a series of clips that show the women either in



The cover art for *Angry Indian Goddesses* features goddesses from the Hindu canon.

revelry or in despair. In a scene reminiscent of montages from Hollywood films such as *Bridesmaids* and *Girls' Trip*, an upbeat song provides the background to a series of images that depict “liberated Indian woman” clichés including shots of them at a spa, at the beach in bikinis, at a club in short dresses and low cut tops. A scene later in the film reveals the women’s disdain for Indian clothing. When Pam says she wants to wear a saree for the wedding, Su responds “I’m so surprised yaar (friend), you want to wear a saree” mockingly. The film deliberately centers its feminism in tropes borrowed from the West, establishing that this film showcases women who have access to products from India’s globalized economy and that using those products makes them seem ideologically “liberated.”



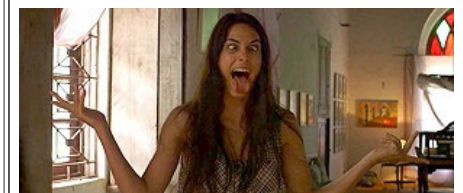
The diversity of goddesses is meant to represent the diversity of roles women play in society — as is discussed later in the film.



The “angriest Indian goddess” Kali.



The friends act out their version of Kali.



Rage is assuaged by the solidarity among the women, signalling the escapist fantasy of an all-female utopia.

The film’s episodic narrative structure allows the script, especially in incident and dialogue, to flit from discussion of one social issue to another. *Angry* is a movie that is deliberately self-aware, as Suprateek Chatterjee of *Huffington Post India* phrases it, in its “relentless quest to tick boxes off” (Chatterjee). At various points in the film, we get snippets of conversation about work-life balance, discrimination in the workplace, and sexual harassment. The women evoke Kali to discuss the hypocrisy of a culture that worships goddesses and yet condemns and dehumanizes women socially. Kali is the “angriest Indian goddess,” the women proclaim. “We all have Kali inside us.” The characters are angry, and they let us know this in no uncertain terms.



Pam and Frieda discuss Pam’s arranged marriage. Pam suggests that it was the

While their anger might echo Kali’s, it is rarely desperate. In a scene where Mad, Frieda and Pam discuss the restrictions Pam faces in her arranged marriage, Pam confesses how sometimes when the whole world puts pressure on you, all you want to do is give in. Frieda’s quick retort—“give up, not give in”—has a judging tone that pervades the film. The film assumes that these are not helpless women who have no say in a patriarchal system; they are figures with agency who if they “give up,” have made an active choice to let the patriarchy subsume them. The film champions women who have the space to express their discontent and want to do so in no uncertain terms.

The exaggerated space for such personal expression in no small part comes from the lack of significant male characters. Touted “India’s first female buddy film,” *Angry* is consciously homosocial film; the script assigns men largely to roles as



pressures of a patriarchal family structure that made her “give in.”



Lakshmi, the domestic help appears conspicuously “other” from the urban goddesses, wearing Sarees and speaking largely in Hindi.



Lakshmi and the “grandmother” speak a local dialect with each other.



The girls envelop the “grandmother” while she dances for Frieda as a wedding gift to her. A symbolic solidarity soon dissipates into more visual markers of modernity.



Nargis (left) and Su (right) represent two sides of the political spectrum. The film seems to side with Su’s neoliberal agenda despite making a big show of championing intersectional solidarity.

antagonists with the occasional “good guy” placeholder. In marketing terms, calling it a new women’s “buddy film” genre is exploited and deployed to establish the film as entirely different from anything before it. For example, placing the women in Goa, far away from their problems (read: men), allows these characters to indulge in an escapist fantasy of reflection and resistance. Pam’s marital problems get resolved in an intimate moment between her and Mad when Pam finds the strength to say she wants a divorce. She then asks Mad if she could come live with Mad, positing the female bond not just as intangible and emotional but rather as a tangible, material support in the form of a place to stay. In this sense, Pam is quite literally replacing the male presence in her life with a female friend. In a similar moment, Frieda’s choice to marry a woman dismantles the male-female relationship literally and symbolically. Whether through homosexuality or homosociality, the message is clear: women’s solidarity enables agency.

The supportive framework here is, however, decidedly exclusionary. As Baradwaj Rangan, film critic for *The Hindu* writes:

“Nalin creates an ideal, insular world—a womb, really—where women can heal through talks and tears and therapeutic hugs. Only one woman recoils from an embrace, and she’s the domestic help. Maybe she’s uncomfortable with physical intimacy. Or maybe where she comes from, they don’t do these things. There aren’t many others from her class, and the film isn’t apologetic about this. Again, a matter of focus—even if this could cause the film to be titled, in some quarters, as *Angry Indian Upper-Class Goddesses*.” (Rangan, 2015)

Lakshmi (the help) is the figure that breaks away from the film’s monopolizing representation of the urban elite. She is working class, less educated and displays her otherness through her accented speech and Indian clothing. The film makes a deliberate attempt to include her in the narrative, to establish that her concerns and her struggles are as legitimate and worthy of audience attention as the others. However, as Rangan highlights, even in the film’s pseudo-attempt at inclusive feminism, “the domestic help... recoils from an embrace.” Lakshmi is notably absent in scenes resplendent with displays of “liberated” female sexualities such as one in which the women play truth or dare, imitating orgasms and discussing their sex lives. She is equally excluded in scenes that depict the excesses of upper-class elitism: spas, drinking and going to clubs. Both literally and metaphorically, Lakshmi is the character who doesn’t belong.

There is another attempt at interclass-solidarity feebly siphoned through the figure of the “grandmother”—a local maid relegated to menial chores like washing clothes and cleaning the house. Unlike the other women—Lakshmi included—the “grandma” speaks a local language and cannot communicate in Hindi. Her presence in the film is sporadic and irrelevant to the plot as a whole. We are, in fact, left in the dark as to why she is included at all. Considering the film’s “tick the boxes” nature, it seems that her presence is nothing more than a token insert to extend female solidarity beyond the urban elitism that grounds the film. This hypothesis finds evidence in a scene in which the “grandma” presents Frieda with a wedding gift by dancing to a song in her local language. The women form a circle around her and they all dance together, a symbolic gesture literalized through an enclosure of the rural by the urban. As one of them exclaims “how cute!” this symbolic acceptance takes on a decidedly patronizing tone, at which point the scene cuts away to reveal the core group at the beach drinking and dancing. Yet again, we see an attempt at inclusion dissipate into more visible markers of liberation.

These explicit shows of solidarity suggest that *Angry* is in favor of supporting a larger female collective. A fundamental contradiction, however, arises between the characters’ performance of solidarity and the kinds of characters and issues the film presents. A shallow reading of *Angry*’s relationships might mistake the friends’ deep involvement in each other’s lives as a sign of greater solidarity



Nargis fights for Adivasi rights.



Nargis shakes up the easy narrative of equality between genders by bringing other identities into the mix.



Nargis and Maya play together.



Su watches wistfully.



Cut to the next scene and Su cancels the landgrab attempt, moved by her daughter's

between them and women's collectivity . A striking scene towards the end of the film reveals something else:

Nargis and Su, characters placed on either end of the political spectrum, share an antagonistic relationship throughout the film. Su, the forceful businesswoman, is the epitome of a capitalist notion of female success. Nargis, the strong-willed activist, has her roots in a communist model that has historically engaged with communities across the range of modern India. The two spar repeatedly over Su's corporation's encroaching on tribal land, the very land Nargis is fighting to reclaim. Yet the antagonism between them is framed as personal rather than political. As they face off in a heated moment in the following scene, we see the larger issue of equality reduced to the realm of the individual:

The scene is set up with the girls discussing rape culture in India after having been harassed by a group of men on the streets of Goa. They are upset by the men's crassness and their own helplessness, leading to one of the film's many discussions of "problems women face in India." There's a moment of reflection but it breaks into an argument when Pam tries to blame the men's behavior on a culture of poverty. Nargis argues with her, emphasizing that problems of rape and harassment are often rooted in middle class concern with "honor." Everyone agrees; then Su brings up the need for class equality. Indignant, Nargis counters, "Instead of grabbing land from people, actually fight for equality."

Su's reaction—"Oh god, can we get beyond personal and smaller issues?"—reeks of privilege: her phrasing reduces the vast, heated issue of tribal land appropriated for corporate use to "personal and smaller issues." The implication here could not be more obvious: *my* issue holds more weight than anything else. The other girls react with a similar contempt, solidifying the film's tendency to disregard intersectional social issues and place itself firmly in the realm of the elite.

The implications of this dismissal cannot be understood without a preliminary understanding of Nargis' activism. Here it involves the historical context of Adivasis, specifically Adivasi women in the socio-economic fabric of postcolonial India. A historically marginalized group, the term Adivasi literally means "original inhabitant." The [Adivasi] scheduled tribe (ST) population is 104.2 million, which is 8.6 percent of the total population of India (Government of India). The largest indigenous community in the world, Adivasis became victims of vicious land grabs and taxation under the Zamindari system established by the British in 1793. The concept of private property has significantly altered the Adivasis' way of life, marginalizing their claims to land and leaving them in constant conflict with an increasingly capitalist superstructure. Various movements have come up in response to this oppression. One strand of these is a movement addressing the double oppression of Adivasi women.

Nargis' role as a social activist involved in Adivasi reclamation reveals how the film actually had a potential to embrace intersectional feminism. In a literal sense, the film allowed the activist to win out over the businesswoman as Su warms up to Nargis and gets the building project shut down. However, the framing of this scene portrays this acquiescence as a personal rather than a political decision. Throughout the film we see Su struggling with her relationship to her daughter, who comes across as neglected and often lonely. Moments of tenderness between Nargis and Maya (Su's daughter) lead Su to develop a steadily more amicable relationship with Nargis, helped along by Frieda's insistence that they both get along. In a climactic scene towards the end, Su gazes wistfully at Nargis playing a children's game with Maya. The next scene cuts to her on a phone call with her corporation calling off the project.

Socialism wins over capitalism. The women's collective achieves a victory. And yet the mode of transition is decidedly suspect. Throughout the film there is no mention of what Nargis is actually fighting for. In the framework of long, angst-

relationship with Nargis.

filled discussions about the treatment of women in India, not one of these analyses is spared for the indigenous women being brutalized by land-grabbing and systematic capitalist attack. What wins Su over is not a thought-provoking conversation with Nargis about the need for intersectionality or collective empowerment (which would hardly be out of place in this film), but an emotionally poignant moment that causes her to sympathize with Nargis the maternal figure, not Nargis the activist. It becomes clear that the facade of solidarity, siphoned through Lakshmi and the grandmother is just that, a facade.

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# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

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The four protagonists of *Veere* represent versions of the “empowered independent woman,” dressing in visibly western attire and smoking, drinking and partying at the drop of a hat.



Kalindi's discomfort at the idea of marriage is apparent in her reaction to being proposed to.



At the Sangeet function before the wedding, Kalindi and fiancé are made to dance for their guests in a tinseltownesque display that goes against Kalindi's notion of a modern wedding.

*Angry* is not alone in this erasure of minority women and elevation of entrepreneurial feminism. In 2018, *Veere di Wedding*, a more lavish “buddy film” featuring four young women navigating marital relationships, recreates the same urban empowerment narrative for a more mainstream audience. The film features four urban upper-class women:

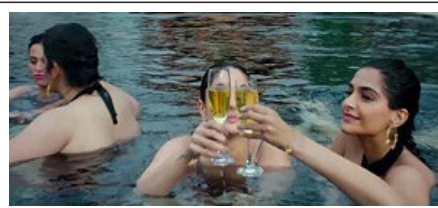
- Kalindi (Kareena Kapoor) as the commitment-phobe,
- Avni (Sonam Kapoor) as the perfectionist wrestling with single life while not wanting to end up in an arranged marriage,
- Sakshi (Swara Bhaskar) as the to-be divorcee with a raunchy streak,
- Meera (Shikha Talsania) as the harrowed mother with a non-existent sex life.

*Veere* produces a narrative arc through the steady decline in Kalindi's relationship with her fiancé, driven along primarily by his infuriatingly traditional family. Along the way, we see the other women dealing with their own marital and family problems, all meant to typify the struggles of urban womanhood.

Throughout the film, the main tussle remains the tug-of-war between tradition and modernity. The four protagonists are sexually liberated, carefree, “modern,” but they are also trapped in a system that judges them for their desire to smoke, drink and sleep around. In other ways, too, the women push back against tradition. Kalindi, the bride-to-be feels revulsion at how her individuality is subsumed by her fiancé's family's expectations. The obscene and gaudy displays of wealth by this stereotypically Punjabi family lead her to rethink her decision to get married, when it becomes clear that familial expectations will always take centerstage for her fiancé. This decision leads to a big falling out with her “*Veeres*” (literally, *brothers*—used to refer to the four protagonists throughout the film).

To resolve this tension and take Kalindi's mind off her broken marriage, the women head to Phuket. As the women drink and dance away their sorrows, they heal and return to India with an unexplained ability to resolve all their problems. Meera admits to her girlfriends that she hasn't had sex in a year and, on returning to Delhi, ends up having sex. Sakshi admits that her divorce is a consequence of her having been caught masturbating and finds the courage to reveal this to her parents back home, who, far from chastising her, laugh at her reluctance to share this with them earlier. Avni has an uncharacteristic revelation about the pressures of finding a husband and comes back with a newfound ability to “keep things casual.” Only Kalindi's narrative falters a bit, yet her trajectory is redeemed soon enough through some deft manipulation by her friends. Tertiary relationships are mended and the wedding is brought back on. With a series of convenient *deus ex machinas*, we find ourselves bopping along to an upbeat credits sequence at the wedding that renders all the unresolved conflicts and contradictions irrelevant.

In interviews during the film's press junket, the cast made it a point to explicitly dismiss any claims that the film is feminist. Swara Bhaskar, whose scene in *Veere* using a vibrator made headlines for weeks after the film was released, said in an interview “[The film] is not taking up the mantle of feminism. The story is about four women dealing with adulthood... Our endeavor is to make it as real as possible” (NDTV). In the same interview, she added “[The film] shows women making choices,” which she calls “empowering.” In another interview, her costar Sonam Kapoor claimed that *Veere* provides “aspiration for women to be a certain way,” going on to call the film “empowering” (Film Companion).



In Phuket, the “Veeres” drink together, healing from their marital/ relationship problems in the most extravagant of settings.



Sakshi parties at a stripclub, one of the many periodic reminders in the film that these are “empowered independent women” in charge of their own sexualities.



Meera returns home and, after a year of feeling estranged from her husband, has sex with him.



Sakshi’s masturbation scene caused a great hue and cry among audiences who accused the film’s version of feminism of inciting women to become licentious and irreverent.



Choice of clothing is a big part of the neoliberal feminist version of empowerment: in *A/G*, the women wearing bikinis indicates their liberation from oppressive traditions.



To assert that such empowerment is an “aspiration for women” exemplifies the ideology behind the neoliberal feminist gaze. The urban elite woman rolling in privilege decides not to get married, talks openly about masturbation, has sex with her husband despite her body insecurities—an empowerment championed by entrepreneurial feminism. The publicity around the film implies that seeing four urban women “just living their lives” will seem empowering to all women spectators because seeing privileged women making choices that benefit them enables women spectators across the spectrum to make (or imagine) those same choices through some sort of trickle-down feminism.

It is this marketing of individual choice that we see proudly bastioned by the teams behind *Veere* and *Angry*. Here, the women’s movement is a relic of the past, with liberation for the masses smoothly replaced by a push for individual agency. Thus, when the actresses proudly proclaim “this is not a feminist film” or “we are just expressing ourselves” in marketing campaigns (BollywoodHungama.com), they are disavowing the very idea of collective empowerment in exchange for exercising their own agency. They are, in a sense, “liberated” from the pressures of advocating for structural change. Chaudhuri’s claim that “...popular representation of feminism in the media reflects a retreat from questions of class, caste and social justice [and becomes] a matter of the individual woman’s right to choose” (273) could not be more evident in both the films and their marketing.

Returning to my original example, the “My Choice” video, the same questions come up again: Who benefits from this insistence that to be liberated all women

The neoliberal feminist gaze centers on choice, ignoring factors like class and caste that often render choice meaningless.



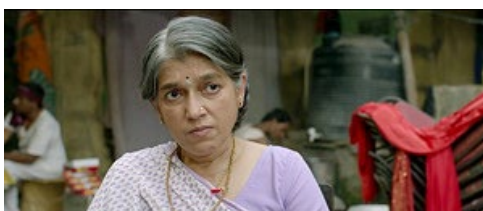
Rehana uses a Burkha to shoplift cosmetics and clothing which she wears to college.



Leela and her photographer boyfriend start a honeymoon service for couples looking to be photographed while traveling.



Here we see Shireen going from door to door selling "Magic" products. The breadwinner of the family, she represents a growing section of Indian women who must now juggle domestic responsibilities with a new desire for financial independence.



Usha, the apparently pious widow, covertly signs

need to do is "choose" liberation? Does the facade of inclusion have any value when spearheaded by a social group that is disdainful towards, or unconcerned with, the women it claims to include? *Angry* and *Veere*'s championing of choice feminism rooted firmly in urban elite privilege reflects the tokenism plaguing this dominant trend in contemporary Indian feminism.

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## An alternative?

Set in a semi-urban town, *Lipstick Under My Burkha* features four women facing their own distinct struggles against patriarchal oppression. These women are decidedly different from the "goddesses" and "Veeres." For one, their narrative context places them in an uncomfortable tension between tradition and modernity. These are not "liberated" urban women who proudly proclaim their right to drink, sex, party. They are bound by a space that gives them physical access to these opportunities and yet restrains them through norms and values associated with home and community.

Rehana, played by Plabita Borthakur, is the youngest of the four. Her love for Miley Cyrus is not coincidental: she leads a bizarre double life, ripping off her Burkha when she enters her college and covering up her jeans and punk T-shirts up when she reenters the *Mohalla* (community living quarter). Her story starts off the film as we see her shoplifting a lipstick from an upscale department store in a mall. This incident sets up her constant attempts at rebellion, marking her desire to obtain both tangible and intangible markers of Western modernity. Her struggle represents that of the young girl who wants to be "cool" but who is limited by tradition, religion, inflexibility.

Leela's story is next. She has a relationship with a photographer whom she views as her ticket to escape. At the same time, she is forced into arranged marriage by a mother who knows all too well what happens to a woman who has no one to provide for her.

Shireen is the wife who cannot quite swallow her wifedom. We first see her as a door-to-door saleswoman with great sales instincts and the ability to make conversation with just about anyone. This entrepreneurial skill is soon shrouded by her relationship with a husband who rapes her constantly, forces her to give up contraception and, as we later find out, has a mistress. The story reveals both his desire for dominance as well as his incompetence in holding a job and making money for his family. Shireen, in many ways, functions as the real provider for the family.

Usha, the pious widow with an array of closeted sexual fantasies is the voice that hangs the plot together. Her narration of an erotic novel *Lipstick ke Sapne* (*Lipstick Dreams*) provides the background for visual depictions of each of the women's stories. Her own story most explicitly parallels the novel as she begins fantasizing about her young swimming instructor quite like the novel's protagonist "Rosie."

These four women's lives are woven together through seamless transitions carefully narrated by Usha from the novel. In this sense, the film parallels *Angry*'s style of moving from scene to scene by ushering the viewer from one woman's story to another. However, where the use of this technique in *Angry* gives the film a hurried, "tick the boxes" feel, *Lipstick* uses it to weave together seemingly disconnected plots while giving each of the women's stories ample screen time.

In other ways too, *Lipstick* manages to evade the traps that *Angry* so ingeniously falls into. For one, *Lipstick* often does not provide an aesthetically pleasant viewing experience. Scenes involving sex and desire, although aplenty, are



up for swimming classes and ends up falling in love with her much younger instructor. Her desires are given center stage, putting older women's sexuality on Indian screens for the first time.



Sex scenes in *Lipstick* are often unpleasant, a stark contrast to the titillating scenes in *A/G* and *Veere*.



Shireen's husband often rapes her, highlighting the massive problem of marital rape, which remains unrecognized as a crime by the Indian Penal Code.



Shireen with tears in her eyes at Leela's parlor.

decidedly disconcerting, if not distasteful. Sreehari Nair, a Rediff reviewer writes:

"The biggest disappointments of *Lipstick Under My Burkha* are its sex scenes... Devoid of any heat, photographed in the most unimaginative manner, and 'calculated' to a fault, the sex scenes in *Lipstick Under My Burkha* have the power to wean both women and men off sex... Despite all the claims it makes about a woman's right to express herself completely, this is an apologetic film that doesn't even know how to frame a woman's body; it isn't generous or airy enough to just let a woman be, and take over the sequences... 2015's *Angry Indian Goddesses* was—for three quarters of its length at least—a sensual, fluid movie that showed us how women behave in their most private moments, how they confront their vanities, how their bodies move in relation to each other." (Nair)

His criticism is not unfounded: the film's sex and desire do indeed feel mechanical, "calculated." I disagree that this is bad filmmaking but rather interpret the presentation as a deliberate attempt to subvert erotic depictions of sex. What Shrivastava does with skill is to paint sex as an experience of abjection that can be unpleasant, even scarring. The scenes of Shireen being raped by her husband are particularly poignant in this respect as they deftly scrape away at the notion that watching sex on screen must always be arousing for the viewer. In contrast, sexual expression and fulfilment are categorically pleasurable experiences for the "goddesses" of *Angry*, allowing viewers to take pleasure in the "sensual," fluid movements of the women's bodies. That sanitized visualization of desire reinforces the assertion that *Angry* flirts openly with the commercialized female body. *Veere*'s music video "Tareefan" performs a similar role: depicting the women as objects of desire even while reversing the roles by putting the women centerstage instead of men.

While all three films primarily depict individual desire, the socio-economic position of *Lipstick*'s characters enables the film to evade the demands of the neoliberal feminist gaze. Two of the four (Rehana and Shireen) are Muslim. Usha is significantly older than all mainstream heroines in recent Bollywood past. All of them live with constant financial struggles. Their *Mohalla* is being scouted by a private company looking for land on which to build a mall. None of them have the resources or support to indulge in escapism. When they look for indulgence, they face the consequences almost immediately. Contrast this with the indulgent escapism and vigilantism marketed by *Angry* and *Veere*.

The comparison between *Angry* and *Lipstick* in particular is worth making as both films all but erase men from their narratives. Yet, whereas in *Angry* the women rely on each other for emotional and material support, in *Lipstick* the women are rarely concerned with each other's lives. Interactions between the protagonists are far and few between. Yet when moments of face to face contact arise, they reveal how attuned to each other's struggles the women really are.

For example, a particularly poignant moment comes out in the interaction between Shireen and Leela at Leela's waxing parlor. Shireen asks Leela a seemingly innocent question about her wedding Lehenga, leading to a conversation about Leela's "Suhaag Raat," the term for the first night of consummation between husband and wife. Following is a transcription of the scene:

"Shireen: Is your wedding dress ready?

....

Leela: [Describes the Lehenga]... I just need a new bra for the Suhaag Raat. (Sarcastically) A special bra for a girl's most "special night." Doesn't your company makes bras like that? You must wear them. That's why every night is your suhaag raat. Your life is such a success, my God!



The intimacy of the parlor, a female-only space, allows Shireen and Leela to share experiences they could never talk about in a heterosocial setting.



Leela's acknowledgement of Shireen's marital struggles reveals an alternate feminism, one that recognizes that some suffering cannot be alleviated through mere choice.



Small moments of recognition, like this scene in which Shireen helps Usha buy a bathing suit, are what get these women through their often dreary lives.



Leela drives Rehana to a party to help her escape the Mohalla's restrictive rules.

Pause. A tear rolls down Shireen's cheek.

Leela: What happened? Are you crying?

Shireen: Just hurts a little.

Leela: Nobody hurts when I wax Di. Does he not touch you tenderly down there? Has he ever even kissed you?

Shireen: Why are you asking if you already know everything?

Leela: You know what our problem is? We dream too much."

The passivity of Leela's acknowledgement of Shireen's suffering is revealing. Leela clearly understands what Shireen is going through. She does not, however, attempt to help Shireen or to alleviate her distress. Where in *Angry* the women use each other to escape their oppressive marriages and their struggles with restrictive social conventions, in *Lipstick* the women are too encumbered by their own stories to involve themselves in anyone else's problems. As Leela's subdued words, "We dream too much," reveal, they are resigned to private resistance, often available to them only through fantasy. The question of choice simply does not arise.

It is in Leela's recognition of Shireen's distress that we find *Lipstick's* agenda. The film suggests that empowerment as manifested in big visible victories is not the only empowerment that works. *Lipstick* shows us the possibility of empowerment as quiet acknowledgement, as solidarity that refuses to "fix" or "save" anyone. Scenes like the one in which Shireen spots Usha at the mall and buys her a swimsuit she is too ashamed to ask for, or one in which Leela drives Rehana to a party, give us these moments of acknowledgement. No questions are asked, no lengthy sermons about the revolutionary potential of these moments get made. Recognition is enough, and it is what gets these women through their often dreary lives.

The final scenes of *Lipstick* literalize Jack Halberstam's assertion that "failure [can be seen as] a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique." In a sequence that moves between shots of the four women, we see each of their secret lives humiliatingly exposed. Rehana is seized by the cops as a shoplifter in front of a crowd from her college. Shireen accepts a job as a sales trainer only to be caught by her husband who sneers at her ambitions, tells her to stay home and "act like a wife" and, in a vicious performance of domination, rapes her. Leela begins to come around to her arranged marriage only to be told by her fiancé that he looked through her phone and found videos of her cheating. In a horrifying sequence, Usha is dragged out of her home by the men (and some women) of the *Mohalla* and called an "impure" "widow" who has dishonored her community and her "age" by phoning a young man and "talking dirty" to him. Her erotic novels and other belongings are thrown into the *Mohalla's* courtyard and she falls beside them, disgraced and humiliated.

The final scene gives the viewer *Lipstick's* solitary window into something of the "empowerment narrative" seen in the other films, though in a more complex form that combines critique and consolation. Shireen, Rehana and Leela help Usha gather her belongings and bring her back to Rehana's father's store. They sit together in the back, reading *Lipstick ke Sapne* (Usha's romance novel) aloud. The men watch them banding together but let them be, content in the knowledge that their homosociality marks consolation, not rebellion. As they read, the triumphant narrative of the protagonist Rosie—finding the man of her dreams, expressing her desires freely, *choosing* happiness—offers a sobering contrast to





Leela's fiancé learns that she cheated on him, breaking up the impending marriage.



Usha becomes the center of attention at the Mohalla when her dirty secrets are found out and her belongings are thrown to the courtyard as she kneels to pick them up.



The novel *Lipstick Ke Sapne* that ties the women together.



In the last scene, the women take turns reading parts of the novel aloud to each other, recognizing the limitations they cannot escape, but taking refuge in each other to alleviate the pain. Could this be an alternate version of empowerment?

the real lives of these women. In the novel, the desiring feminist gaze receives its fulfilment: the woman is unchained, the narrative arc is complete. In the film, however, we remain in an uncomfortable stasis that offers no grand triumph, no moment of relief from the weariness of womanhood.

## Is *Lipstick Under My Burkha* a feminist film?

For the milieu typified by the likes of Ranjana Banerji ("*Lipstick* .. took me back a few decades because it did not even hint that [strong] women exist"), the answer is no, *Lipstick* is not a feminist film. I, however, suggest that in its resistance to the demands of the neoliberal feminist gaze, *Lipstick* does something far more radical than *Angry* or *Veere*. It takes on the task of depicting the double oppression of patriarchy and neoliberalism, thus expanding the ambit of what empowerment might mean to include women who have not profited off of entrepreneurial feminism.

Representations of contemporary Indian women on film have been co-opted by a commercial agenda that seeks to peddle empowerment as a delectable, aspirational commodity. Films like *Angry* and *Veere* package this narrative and produce glorious triumphs for the feminist "cause." *Lipstick*, however, forces failure into the viewer's purview. It categorically distances itself from its audience, exploring the inner lives of women who don't fit the norm of the "empowered independent woman" without asking how their stories empower others.

Before *Lipstick* could be released in India, it had to pass through the censor board, a committee that took no offense to the majority of other women-centric films being released. Contesting "female empowerment" narratives in Bollywood around the same time, even allowing *Angry* to be released after a series of (admittedly rather ridiculous) cuts. They did not, however, clear *Lipstick* for release. Censor board chief Pahlaj Nihalani's letter stated,

"The story is lady oriented, their fantasy above life. There are continuous sexual scenes, abusive words, audio pornography and a bit sensitive touch about one particular section of society, hence film refused under guidelines (sic)." (FE Online)

The objectionable aspect of *Lipstick*'s "lady oriented" nature is what gives the film its radical potential. Despite being grouped with other films riding the contemporary trend of feminist Bollywood, *Lipstick* does something very different: it challenges the notion that to be of value, a woman must make bold choices that subvert patriarchal traditions. It shows women without power in uncomfortable situations, hiding their inner lives to appease the society in which they operate. Without peddling empowerment or aspiration, it offers representation to women who cannot fight the powers that be. It is this subversion of the norms of contemporary feminist productions that so greatly threatened the Indian censor board.

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In her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey writes:

"It is said that analysing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. That is the intention of this article. The satisfaction and reinforcement of the ego that represent the high point of film history hitherto must be attacked. Not in favour of a reconstructed new pleasure, which cannot exist in the abstract, nor of intellectualised unpleasure, but to make way for a total negation of the ease and plenitude of the narrative fiction film." (344)

My attempt to deconstruct and disrupt the "ease" of the neoliberal empowerment narrative in contemporary feminist Bollywood is the same. In an industry that dominates all forms of cultural production in India, it is imperative that



filmmakers present stories people find unsettling, rather than resting in the comfort of cultivated narratives. Producing alternatives within the culture machine creates space for alternative ways of thinking, of understanding failure, of engaging with feminism. Without this space, we cannot hope to break away from the monopolizing narratives that trap women into being objects of neoliberal feminist desire. Without this space, the most marginalized will continue to remain unheard.

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## Notes

1. The Blank Noise Campaign is a community project aimed at ending street sexual harassment in India. It combines art with resistance through movements like Reclaim the Night and I Never Ask For It. [\[return to page 1\]](#)
2. According to its website, The Friday Convent is “a non-profit network of professional women, offering a holistic support platform to connect authentically in an environment of trust and confidentiality... The Friday Convent helps develop the professional lives of women and enhance their personal leadership skills.”
3. C. Kripalani finds evidence of this transformation in the emergence of product placement in Bollywood films starting in the late 90s, with Subhash Ghai’s *Taal* (1999) featuring a placement for Coke that was rumored to have cost upwards of 75 Lakh ((US\$174,418 approx.) (Kripalani).

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



*Anugraham/Kondura* (Grace, dir. Shyam Benegal, 1977) was a rare example of a bilingual art film made in Telugu and Hindi simultaneously. Benegal and the late Girish Karnad collaborated on the screenplay. It had actors/stars like Smita Patil and Vanisri from the north and the south, rendering visibility to the efforts of artists across borders in the parallel cinema movements in Hindi and Telugu.



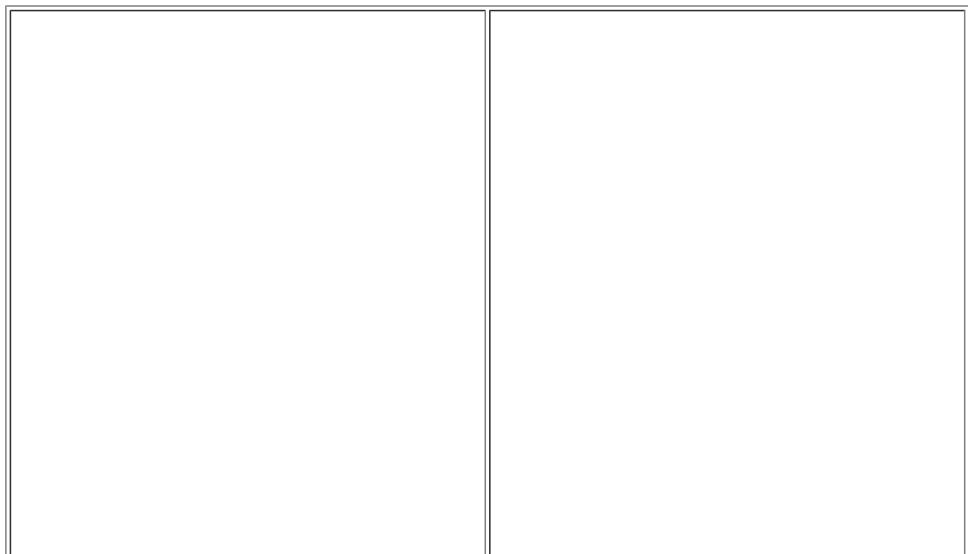
*Agraharathil Kazhuthai* (Donkey in a Brahmin Village, dir. John Abraham, 1977) was a critique of the casteist Tamil society. John Abraham was a student of Ritwik Ghatak at the Film and Television Institute of India and aspired to bring in a change in Tamil cinema through his choice of the form and the Bunelesque content.

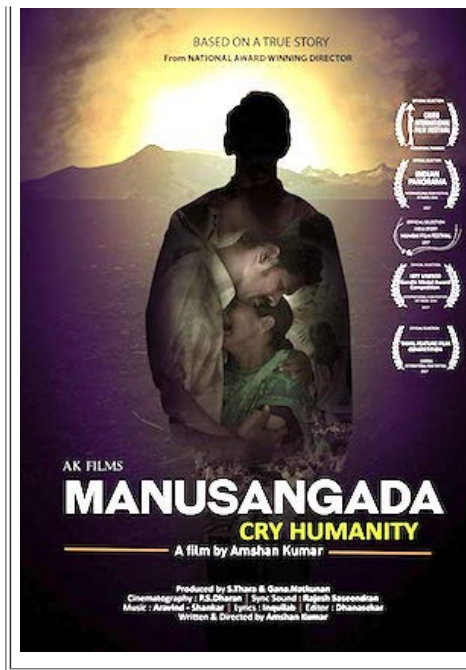
## Contemporary Tamil cinema and its departure from the mainstream: *Manusangada/Cry Humanity* and *To Let*

by [Swarnavel Eswaran](#)

### Tamil cinema and its discontents

Tamil-language cinema during the 1970s had little art cinema or a parallel cinema movement as occurred in Malayalam or Kannada. While Telugu-language cinema, the other major film industry in South India, has had occasional art films by famous directors—like *Oka Oori Katha* (The Marginal Ones, dir. Mrinal Sen, 1977), *Anugraham* (Grace, dir. Shyam Benegal, 1978), which was simultaneously made in Hindi as *Kondura*, *Maa Bhoomi* (Our Land, dir. Goutam Ghose, 1979), *Daasi* (The Courtesan, dir. B. Narsing Rao, 1988), and *Matti Manushulu* (Mud People, dir. B. Narsing Rao, 1990)—Tamil cinema still lacks the aura of such art cinema legends. Even though the iconic John Abraham made his film *Agraharathil Kazhuthai* (Donkey in a Brahmin Village, 1977) in Tamil, it was not enough to deflect criticism regarding the lack of seriousness in Tamil film. There's also been occasional experimentation within the mainstream, as seen in Tamil films like *Andha Naal* (That Day, dir. S. Balachandar, 1954), and in that middle-of-the-road cinema between the arthouse and the mainstream, like *Uthiripookkal* (Strewn Flowers, dir. J. Mahendran, 1979). However, particularly in the last two years, a more consistent effort at challenging the norms of mainstream cinema could be perceived in the films of Amshan Kumar (*Manusangada*), Ra. Chezhiyan (*To Let*), and Lenin Bharathi (*Merku Thodarchimalai*/Western Ghats, 2018). The first two of these films are closely examined here. In spite of a popular Tamil saying, “*Thani maram thoppagaathu*/A single tree cannot be considered as a grove,” these two films point to a hopeful beginning of a more serious, parallel Tamil cinema.





Tamil cinema usually incorporates the popular narratives interspersed with song sequences. Some experiments have gone on within this tradition, and certain decades have been distinct. For instance, in the 1970s, Tamil cinema broke the shackles of the studio system and moved outdoors, particularly to actual locales in villages, in order to realistically narrate the predicament of people living away from the capital city of Madras (now known as Chennai). Filmed locales also moved away from artificially constructed village sets in places like Kundrathur in the outskirts of the city, the headquarters of many of the significant studios and the South Indian film industry. Still, serious film critics during the 1970s castigated Tamil cinema for its lack of investment in an alternative cinema. For instance, Chidanand Das Gupta writes,



Similarly, Tamil's celebrated painter Marudu Trotsky notes how filmmakers' reliance till the mid-1930s on studios in the state of Maharashtra due to the lack of studios in Tamilnadu's capital Madras (Chennai) led to the influence of the ornate mythology-inflected painting style of Marathi cinema—for instance, as



*Sila Nerangalil Sila Manithargal* (Some People Sometimes, dir. A. Bhimsingh, 1976) was an adaptation of a famous novel of the same name in which the author Jayakanthan collaborated on the screenplay. Bhimsingh, an iconic director of Tamil commercial films, explored new territory by engaging with patriarchy and gender through the lives and times of a young woman and her encounter with a stranger.



*Pather Panchali* (Song of the Road, Satyajit Ray, 1955). Ray's *Pather Panchali* is widely regarded as the film which started the art cinema movement, mainly because of its visibility through the film festival circuit and popularity among critics, filmmakers, and serious cinema buffs. However, Ritwik Ghatak's *Nagarik* (The Citizen, 1952) preceded *Pather Panchali*.

reflected in the Indian cinema pioneer Dadasaheb Phalke's films, India's first film *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) and *Kaliya Mardhan* (Krishna's Childhood, 1919), among others. According to Trotsky, this trend in Tamil cinema during its early decades has had a lasting impact and has led to the disavowal of the specificity of Tamil culture. This artificiality went on till the mid-1970s when the film society movement brought more awareness about using an aesthetics of realism and depicting an ethnography of communities of people on the social fringes.[4]

Critics like Das Gupta were also responsible for projecting Indian art cinemas in festival circuits abroad, such as the revered *Pather Panchali* (Song of the Road, dir. Satyajit Ray, 1955). Ironically, this international exposure to art cinema rendered Indian popular cinema less visible outside India, at least till the 1980s. Later, when Indian cinema studies flourished in Western academia, many eminent scholars from the late 1990s on were then invested in recovering the centrality of Hindi popular cinema. Only recently do we see India's regional cinemas, like Tamil, Marathi, and Bengali, etc., getting scholarly attention. But if you look at the international film festivals, Tamil cinema was literally absent during the critical period of the 1970s. This became important in terms of subsequent film studies because for scholars like Aruna Vasudev the 70s was the period of a "New Indian Cinema," that is, the Indian art film that challenged a clichéd and stereotypical mainstream product. To many film scholars, New Indian Cinema means the rise of a new, parallel cinema with new aesthetics, as seen in the work of filmmakers like Shyam Benegal, Mani Kaul, Kumar Shahani, and Adoor Gopalakrishnan.[5]



However, Tamil cinema is conspicuous in its absence from Aruna Vasudev's book, even if,

"films such as *Aval Appadithan* (That's the Way She Is, dir. Arumugam Rudraiah, 1978), *Agraharathil Kazhuthai* (1978), *16 Vayathinile* (At Age 16, dir. Bharathiraja, 1977) and *Uthiripookkal* (Strewn Flowers, dir. J. Mahendran, 1979), marked by ambiguous and dark protagonists, avoidance of clichéd and cathartic closures, experiments in cinematography and editing, and shooting on locations and new subjectivity, signaled the transition of Tamil cinema from the classical period of the studio system to the post-classical." [6]



In fact, there had been Tamil films like *Pasi* (Hunger, dir. Durai, 1979) which was unique in its portrayal of the extramarital love affair of the truck driver Rangan (Delhi Ganesh) with the ragpicker Kuppamma (Shobha); *Pasi* juxtaposed melodrama with the realism of shooting on actual locales in the slums in Madras (Chennai). Among recent films, Leena Manimekalai's *Sengadal* (The Dead Sea, 2011) is another significant film which addressed the issue of the disappearing fisherman in the backdrop of the displacement of Tamils from Sri Lanka. And in the contemporary period, Vetrimaaran's *Visaranai* (Interrogation, 2015) has engaged with police torture through reenactments in a profoundly realistic way. In this trajectory, the iconic cinematographer/director of Tamil cinema, Balu Mahendra's *Veedu* (The House, 1988) could be argued to be the inspiration for *To Let*. [7]



*Veedu* (House, dir. Balu Mahendra, 1988); *Sandhya Raagam* (Tune of the Twilight, dir. Balu Mahendra, 1989). Balu Mahendra's *Veedu* could be regarded as the most influential on Chezhiyan in terms of the theme about a place to live in the metropolis for a middle-class family and its aesthetic of realism surrounding the urban space. Besides, like Balu Mahendra, Chezhiyan too is the director and cinematographer of his film *To Let*.



*Pathai Theriyuthu Paar!* (Look at the New Path, dir. Nemai Ghosh, 1960) was a pathbreaking Tamil film in many ways. Nemai Ghosh, who was responsible for perseveringly organizing the workers in an unorganized sector like the Tamil film industry, set an example by producing the film as a cooperative venture where the participating technicians were also contributors/producers of the film.

With Nemai Ghosh's *Pathai Theriyuthu Paar* (Look at the New Path! 1960) began "parallel" Tamil cinema since the director collected funds from friends so as not to make the compromises that mainstream cinema necessitates. He did not approach regular financiers, so his film was a collaborative effort with many of the investors playing an active role in the production as well. This was the case of the music director, M.B. Srinivasan. The script revolved around workers organizing themselves under oppressive conditions, and in real life, too, the director Nemai Ghosh played an active role in fighting for the reasonable wages of film workers and technicians and organizing and unionizing them in the South. Such a practice of avoiding professional financiers was later followed by Jayakanthan and continues with filmmakers like Amshan Kumar and Chezhiyan. In the films I will analyze here, *Manusangada* and *To Let*, the filmmakers' families were also involved as investors.

Despite some filmmakers' attempts at working in a parallel cinema so as to create a new aesthetic and subject matter, particularly during the 1970s, the main Tamil film industry has always been perceived as being aligned with mainstream cinema, its popular form evolving over the years by strictly adhering to unwritten rules like dependence on the star system and using tropes of masala, for instance, song and dance and action sequences, and popular genres like melodrama, romance, action and comedy. But in this essay, I wish to challenge such a preconceived notion regarding the "perennial" tendencies of Tamil cinema through a reversal of sorts. Here I draw attention to two very recent films, *Manusangada* (Cry Humanity! dir. Amshan Kumar, 2017) and *To Let* (dir. Chezhiyan, 2017). They are now Tamil's *art* cinema, appearing during the centennial year of Tamil cinema – the first Tamil film was *Keechaka Vadham* (The Extermination of Keechaka, dir. R. Nataraja Mudaliar, 1917).

These two films disavow Tamil cinema's penchant for heightened melodrama even if the content of both is highly emotional. Mainstream Tamil cinema is marked not only by melos/music and drama but also by the pacing dictated by the cause-effect logic used in Hollywood film. Most Tamil films have a lack of silence in the soundtrack that would give time for the audience to internalize the narrative and from a distance reflect on the problems faced by the protagonists. Even supposedly alternative or different films by iconic filmmakers like K. Balachandar or Bharathiraja are no exception since some of their significant works are even louder and more highly theatrical, particularly in their climactic moments, than normative mainstream Tamil movies. Tamil films have a general aversion to long-duration shots or long takes—the primary marker of realism to engage with the lived reality of the quotidian protagonists in most art films—and they abuse close-ups.

Moreover, even experimentation in the 1970s was punctuated by the indiscriminate use of the zoom lens; this served neither a Hollywood-driven seamless identification with characters nor art cinema's privileging of a Brechtian aesthetics of distanciation. The two films I am discussing challenge such a mechanical approach, found both in mainstream and off-mainstream Tamil cinema, by seeking a form that suits their content and that disavows the stereotypes of Tamil cinema. For instance, *Manusangada* and *To Let* use songs but not in the playback style of much Tamil cinema where the characters lip-synch the song and dance; *Manusangada* uses the eponymous song for its Dalit politics of protest and *To Let* recycles older Tamil film songs from the 1980s for nostalgia and romance.

Nonetheless, *Manusangada* and *To Let*, even as they astutely challenge popular Tamil film conventions, are far removed from each other in terms of their subject matter and style. For instance, if *Manusangada* recalls Italian neorealism in its aesthetics, it also combines it with the Third Cinema politics of the Latin American films, particularly in presenting the community as an ensemble who



Nataraja Mudaliar was the pioneer who set up the Indian Film Company in Madras and produced and directed South India's first silent film *Keechaka Vadham* (The Extermination of Keechaka, 1917). He is generally regarded as the father of Tamil cinema and the success of *Keechaka Vadham* led him to make other films in the mythological genre: *Draupadi Vastrapaharanam* (The Disrobing of Draupadi, 1918), *Lava Kusa* (1919), *Shiva Leela* (1919), *Rukmini Satyabhama* (1922) and *Mahi Ravana* (1923).

seek justice against the state; it attempts to address a contemporary issue with a style that matches its fiery content. In contrast, *To Let* draws from the languid pace of various art cinema movements across the world that focus on the interiority and alienation of the nuclear family; here, to depict a couple's struggle and failure to rent an apartment in a global city like Chennai (erstwhile Madras), the film seems to stretch time infinitely.



*Barren Lives* (dir. Nelson Pereira dos Santos, 1963) exemplifies Third cinema aesthetics/politics.

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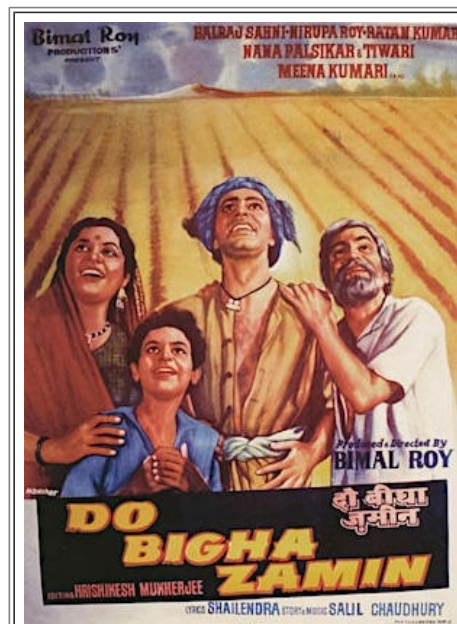


# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Realism, long duration shots, and Indian art cinema

One of the dominant ways in which Indian art cinema marks itself as different is through its investment in realism both in terms of subject matter and style. Even if Bimal Roy's films like *Do Bigha Zameen* (Two Bighas of Land, 1953) were released earlier, Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (Song of the Little Road, 1955) marked the beginning of the art cinema movement in India, mainly because of Ray's consistency in engaging with realism.



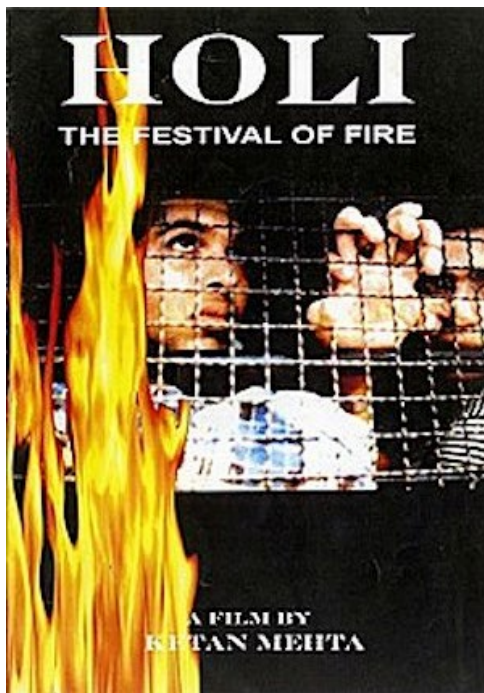
*Do Bigha Zameen* (Two Bighas of Land, dir. Bimal Roy, 1953) is emblematic of Indian parallel cinema, an alternative to the mainstream.



*Bicycle Thieves* (dir. Vittorio De Sica, 1948) is arguably the most influential film as far as the realist aesthetics in Indian (art) cinema is concerned.

By 1960, five years from the release of his internationally acclaimed debut film, Ray had five more films to his credit: *Aparajito* (The Unvanquished, 1956), *Paras Pathar* (The Philosopher's Stone, 1958), *Jalsaghar* (The Music Room, 1958), *Apur Sansar* (The World of Apu, 1959), *Devi* (The Goddess, 1960). As Ray himself acknowledged, Italian Neorealism had a significant influence on him, in particular, Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948). Certain production practices tie Ray to the Italian neorealists: use of non-professional actors except for some eminent artists who had a theatrical background, location shooting, minimal use of background music, unhurried narration, and more importantly, the use of long takes or long duration shots that marked a relatively decelerated pace. Ray staged his key moments cinematically, for instance, the passing away of the grandmother or Durga in *Pather Panchali*, indicating he believed in showing rather than telling.

Ray had a strong influence on Indian filmmakers, and his legacy continues till this day in the work of directors like Girish Kasaravalli and Adoor Gopalakrishnan. As far as Tamil cinema is concerned, one could argue such an aesthetic of realism could be found only in Chezhian's *To Let*. In this context, in one of his recent interviews, Chezhian recalls the impact of *Bicycle Thieves*, speaking of the film in



*Holi* (dir. Ketan Mehta, 1984) draws from the Marathi playwright Mahesh Elkunchwar's script and the aesthetics of realism driven by long-duration shots to engage with campus politics, authority, oppression, and rebellion. *Holi* was shot by the well-known cinematographer Jehangir Choudhary.



*Ghashiram Kotwal* (dirs. K. Hariharan, Mani Kaul, Saeed Akhtar Mirza, and Kamal Swaroop, 1976) draws from the screenplay of the preeminent playwright Vijay Tendulkar and the long-take aesthetics of Miklós Jancsó to juxtapose history and culture with contemporary sociopolitics. *Ghashiram Kotwal* was also an experiment in cooperative/collective production and direction.

the context of his grandfather:

“His grandfather owned a shop that offered cycles on rent. Often, his grandfather will be missing from home for days chasing a cycle that was not returned on time, coming back not always successfully.”[8]  
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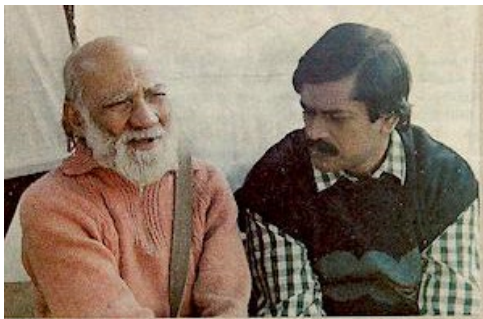
Films like *Sengadal* and *Visaranai* offered a new kind of social content. For example, *Sengadal* has a script that focuses on the predicament of Tamilnadu fisherfolk and their struggle against oppression and state violence; *Visaranai* uses the aesthetic of realism, mainly through its sedate pacing of events, to foreground the plight of tortured innocent prisoners. But *Manusangada* could be argued to push the envelope further as far as socially committed films in Tamil are concerned as the script engages with the denial of burial for Dalits without any subplot. The film style uses extensive long duration shots with a handheld camera which tirelessly follows the main characters throughout the film.

Using the long take to frame a narrative is not new to Indian cinema; for instance, in Ketan Mehta's *Holi* (1984) the style foregrounds rebellion, containment, and oppression. *Ghashiram Kotwal* (dirs. K. Hariharan, Mani Kaul, Kamal Swaroop, and Saeed Mirza, 1976) also uses predominantly long duration shots to choreograph chunks of its narrative in its imperative to weave history and (contemporary) politics in an experimental mode. That film could also be read as a homage to the Hungarian director Miklós Jancsó, famous for his aesthetics of interrogating history through long duration shots in the vast landscape of Hungary. *Manusangada* focuses on a burning social issue, and its objective is to protest caste oppression and Hindu hegemony; the point of its script is clear from the beginning. In terms of its investment in subaltern politics, that film is more aligned with the works of leftist thinkers and committed filmmakers like Mrinal Sen, though its style is far removed from his aesthetics, for instance, as in his famous Calcutta Trilogy—*Interview* (1971), *Calcutta 71* (1972) and *Padatik* (The Guerilla Fighter, 1973). *Manusangada* in its juxtaposition of the aesthetics of realism and Dalit politics recalls the Third Cinema movement of Latin America which began in the 1960s [9]. More important, the persistent use of the long takes in *Manusangada* resonates with the tenacity of its protagonist Kolappan and the filmmaker's own resolve to protest against social injustice based on caste.



*The Red and the White* (dir. Miklos Jancso, 1967) interrogates Hungarian history through long duration shots and stylized mise-en-scène

## *Manusangada*/Cry Humanity: a humane cry against persecution of the Dalits



The “Third Theatre” Icon Badal Sircar and Director Amshan Kumar.

*Manusangada*’s script (written by Amshan Kumar) is inspired by real events that took place in Tamilnadu in 2016 and focuses on the plight of its protagonist Kolappan (Rajeev Anand), who struggles to bury his father. Upper-caste Hindus who live in his neighborhood block him from taking the corpse of his father through the only path in his village that leads to the burial ground. Kolappan is denied his right because he is a Dalit, the lowest caste under Hindu hegemony.

Director Amshan Kumar has an eye for social issues and is an accomplished documentarian. *Manusangada* is his second fiction feature after *Oruthi* (A Woman, 2003), which was based on *Kidai* (Goat Pen/Enclosure), a novella by Tamil’s critically acclaimed novelist Ki. Rajanarayanan that was set during the colonial period.[10] In this film, the Dalit rebellion is a subtext and is mainly represented through the depiction of the life and times of its young Dalit woman protagonist, Sevani (Poorvaja) who loves a higher caste Hindu man Ellappan (Ganesh Babu), who rear goats for a living in the drought-prone village Aalampatti.

“Without qualms you have Ellappan telling her that even if caste comes in the way of their marriage, he would marry her as his second wife. Sevani agrees since it is a norm.”[11]

On the one hand Sevani adheres to the prevailing norms of accepting the unwritten laws of a patriarchal polygamous society, but on the other she also rebels against the system by drawing the attention of the British Revenue Officer to the misdeeds of the zamindar/landlord who keeps harassing the villagers after squandering the tax he has collected from them. As a result, the officer orders the people to pay their dues directly to the Government. Nonetheless, as the Hindu critic Malathi Rangarajan points out,

“The irony is that the entire village which is grateful to Sevani for relieving them from the zamindar’s turmoil, does not want to come out in the open and support her when she appeals to them for help, when Ellappan’s marriage to two women from his own caste is fixed.”[12]

Sevani’s protesting voice thus could be heard in *Oruthi*, but it is subdued. The Dalit rebellion, as epitomized by Sevani during the colonial period, is not emphasized in *Oruthi*, which focuses on her zest to live despite the odds and on her poignant love story. But in *Manusangada*, set in contemporary times, the



*Oruthi* (A Woman, dir. Amshan Kumar, 2003).





Sevani protests alone in *Oruthi*, unlike Kolappan in *Manusangada*.

Dalit protest and fight against injustice and claim for equality are in the foreground and explicitly inform the script; here, in contrast to *Oruthi*, the subtext is the strength that the protagonist Kolappan derives from his community of friends and family to withstand the onslaught of higher caste Hindus, their unjust prejudices and hate politics, and their defiance of law with the connivance of police officers.

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## Manusangada — a visual essay



1. *Manusangada* begins with Kolappan as a young man in his mid-20s working in a steel company in Chennai and sharing an apartment with his friends. He receives a phone call from his brother-in-law (Sasi Kumar) that his father died suddenly from a heart attack. He rushes to his village immediately to make arrangements for his father's burial.



2. On arrival, he is not only overwhelmed by the grief of his father's demise but the violent bullying of higher-caste Hindus and their refusal to allow his father's body to be taken along the only common path to the burial ground. They want to block the funeral procession through their social power and their ability to silence authorities and ignore the law.



3. Kolappan and his friends rely on the advice of Anna (Sethu Darwin), a benevolent social activist, and meet the police and government officials but to no avail. At this point, Kolappan's woman friend Revathi (Sheela Rajkumar) arrives to lend him emotional support.

The next day, Kolappan files a writ in the Chennai High Court to make the upper-caste Hindus abide by the law regarding his freedom to carry the bier with his father's corpse and give it a decent burial. The judgment favors Kolappan's reasonable and humane demand, and the judge directs the state machinery to protect Kolappan and his kin from any violence by the members of the upper caste. But when Kolappan and his friends and relatives arrange for the funeral the next day, the police forbid them from carrying the corpse via the regular path reserved for all the castes, saying violence might break out. Kolappan and his friends insist the police execute the court verdict, but the police are adamant; they do not heed Kolappan and his friends' plea for a peaceful burial and forcefully try to snatch the corpse.







6. Left with no alternatives, Kolappan and his friends and relatives take the body inside his small house and lock themselves in; they threaten to immolate themselves if the police tried to forcibly enter. As Kolappan and his people are claustrophobically locked inside the room around the body with little space to move, the police become anxious about the immolation threat and its potential legal fallout.



Finally, the police seem to give in when the Revenue Divisional Officer (Meenakshi Sundaram) assures Kolappan, who is inside the house, that way is now cleared for them to take the bier along the regular path through the village.



7. On hearing this Kolappan comes outside and proceeds with the tradition of tonsuring his hair before the burial; the funeral rites of decking the bier and the body begin.



8. However, as the bier is carried through the village street, the police, who have been waiting around the street corner, obstruct and halt Kolappan and his people. They swiftly arrest them and forcibly take the body away from them. Then police carry the body through an alternate path full of bushes and thorns away from the village. Kolappan and his people are released later at midnight.





8. Next morning, when Kolappan and his relatives go to the burial ground to do the final rites for his father, an overnight rain has obscured the site's location, and they can only guess a probable gravesite in the marshy wetland surrounded by thorny bushes. An overwhelmed Kolappan falls on the ground with an agonizing cry. The exact grave cannot be found. Speaking about the probability of something like this happening in daily life, the director Amshan Kumar says:

"The practice of the Dalits [forcibly] obeying and carrying out the will and dictates of upper caste in India had been taking place for a very long time. Not only are they denied sites for burying the dead but even carrying their dead through the streets populated by the upper castes is fiercely opposed. But in recent times, among other things, they have begun to question the age-old practices and customs that undermine their rights for equality in public places. Such occasions are few and far between though." [13]  
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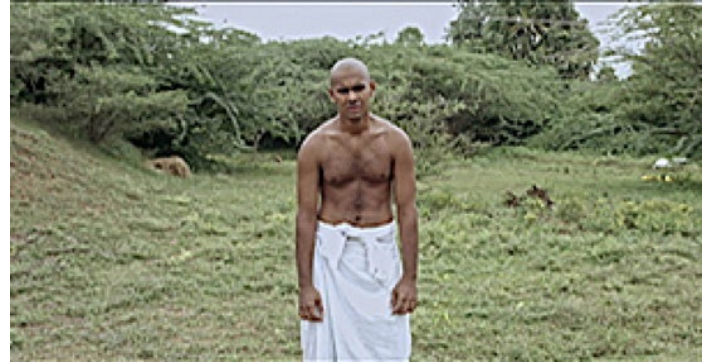
In terms of its script, then, *Manusangada* fictionally represents events surrounding one such act of Dalit protest which took place in 2016 in a village in Nagapattinam District in the southeastern coast of India. The fictional village, Ammaiappan, located near Chidambaram, was chosen due to its resemblance to the actual village, and it too had an ambience based on the geopolitics of caste hierarchy. We see that in the placement of Kolappan's modest house, the town's main street as the pathway to the burial ground, and the street corner where the police suddenly obstruct the funeral procession. Most importantly, Amshan Kumar found it dangerous to film subject matter involving Dalit persecution in actual locales:

"Since every village is clamped down by the same caste structure, enacting the events in broad daylight was very hard. The intimidating prospects of shooting getting obstructed and the film crew harmed by the upper caste were looming large every hour. Amidst great difficulty, the film was completed without compromising on the accuracy of details."

Kumar's objective throughout was to "depict the signaling of the rise of Dalit struggles in contemporary India against long-standing human rights violations." [14] As he explains, his difficulty doing so points to village upper-caste hegemony and control of many locations; so there is still difficulty portraying the social and physical reality surrounding Dalit oppression now.

## Manusangada and the centrality of time

9. The script of *Manusangada* is carefully structured. The narrative revolves around the centrality of time due to the burial's urgency. A commonly occurring "power cut" or disruption to the steady supply of electric power to villages prohibits any convenience of delayed burial, particularly for the poor. Beyond the plot, time has significance in *Manusangada* because the film makes it clear that redressing Dalits' grievance is an urgent and immediate need. They are the most persecuted and the least privileged community in India from times immemorial to the present. *Manusangada's* theme of urgency,



Kumar's production goals also reflexively critique the long history of Madras Studios and Tamil film production, which was dominated by the upper castes as stars/actors, technicians, and producers, both in front and behind the camera. Therefore, only recently has it become possible for scriptwriters and directors to clearly mark a film's main characters as Dalits and narratively engage with upper-caste oppression and segregation.

All of India has been affected by the rise of the virulent Hindutva political movement. Politicians support lynch mobs who are mainly targeting Dalits, Muslims, and Christians. In particular, the gangs use public beatings and other violent acts to enforce their agenda of "love jihad," which puts in extreme danger the lives of the Dalits and any upper-caste Hindu girls or boys who fall in love/marry out of caste. The bullying groups also enforce an undemocratic ban on cow slaughter/beef eating. Just as the limit event of the Emergency of the mid-1970s, which undermined Indian democracy, sparked the popularity of a film hero who was a rebellious "angry young man," especially as played by Amitabh Bachchan, India's present sociopolitics, bordering on religious fascism, may well be the source for contemporary artists' incisive voice of protest. [15]

articulated here via the imminence surrounding a burial, is not limited to the narrative. It is also visually showcased through the meticulous handheld camerawork of the cinematographer P.S. Dharan, Amshan Kumar's long-time collaborator.

Both the grittiness and raw edge of the handheld camerawork and also the figure of the corpse could be read as metaphors for human anxieties surrounding the immediacy of time/decay. But here the metaphors extend to the (dead) rights of the Dalits as the protagonist is constantly bogged down. He comes back home to face the curtailing of his freedom (and the continually moving camera) to bury his father in the ground reserved for all the social groups in his village.

By the director's using a wider lens through most of the sequences, he avoids the more common dramatic aesthetics of frontality and staging. [16] Instead, he chooses a constantly moving camera and its precise framing privilege of an *ensemble* of characters representing a community on the move despite the odds against them. The actors, most of them with rich experience in prestigious theater groups, also play a significant role in the composition of fluid long takes that defy dramatic frontality and emphasize group process.

In this regard, Amshan Kumar has discussed how his documentary filmmaking experience made him rethink about the aesthetics of frontality, here referring to his documentary on the Third Theatre of Badal Sirkar:

"Sirkar was critical of the proscenium arch mode of the traditional theatre wherein the performers have to talk directly to their audience rather than to the fellow characters on the stage. When I watched Sarkar's play in Calcutta, the artistes acted/played their roles moving amidst the benches in the hall. There were multiple characters at times conversing with other characters in the play at various distances from where we were sitting. While watching it, it dawned on me that it is as the audience that we have to make an adjustment to listen and sparse what is significant for the play and not the other way around." [17]



11. Such an aesthetic of the Third Theatre, which is essentially a people's or community theatre, is perceptible in *Manusangada* as well, especially when Kolappan and his friends engage with the police in a heated conversation. Additionally, the improvisational aspect of the re-enactments and the long-take aesthetics provoke a sense of realism as described years earlier by André Bazin about Italian Neorealism, [18] seen here in the bonding between Kolappan and his friends and relatives. The realistic style also is used to lay out Kolappan's apprehensions regarding the arrogance and evil designs of those in power—the nexus of upper-caste Hindus and the state, particularly as we see him with police officials and his lawyer.

Nonetheless, as the unsteady camera frames him, Kolappan's disquietude and restlessness are multi-layered, and various film styles are used to depict his psychological state. He worries about a decent burial of his father's dead body also because of his cultural milieu and ethos. Final rites like the beating of the drum, while carrying the bier to the burial ground and shaving the son's head, are considered essential aspects of the family's duties towards the departed soul, and here they cannot be performed. All this weighs heavily on Kolappan's mind as he is running against time (and rushing along with the moving camera) right from the film's very beginning. His troubled face expresses his feelings



vividly throughout the film.



12. And in a switch of film styles, Kolappan's such suppressed concerns and fears come to the surface in a distinctly dark dream he has on the night when he returns from the court: He is lying next to his father's dead body, and in the dream, he falls into a pit. When he begs for help to climb up and out of the slippery mud walls that surround him, he finds to his dismay that people above, instead of lending a hand, are throwing mud on him to bury him alive.



It is shot from his point of view, with an avalanche of blurred bodies and the upper-caste people standing above literally and metaphorically making it impossible to haul himself up. The nightmare forebodes his own death as it reflects his deep-rooted apprehensions and grief about living in a heartless society. Here too, *Manusangada* disavows the general tendency of Tamil cinema to associate dreams with romance and love but instead uses it to summarize a political nightmare.



13. In *Manusangada's* narrative all the events take place within four days. The film gives a blow by blow account of the significant events, particularly Kolappan's struggle with authorities to peacefully transport his father's corpse into the burial ground. Time is punctuated on the soundtrack throughout by the dialogue of various characters, reminding Kolappan and us about the dead body and its decomposition. What should usually be family time for grieving together here gets replaced by apprehensive visits to the police station and futile meetings with state officials for permission, useless even if the law is on Kolappan's side.



More importantly, the film acquires its urgency because of the village custom that a dead body has to be buried within a specified time, generally within two days, except in case of certain situations like a post-mortem or waiting for a close relative who has to arrive from a long distance. Otherwise, delaying the burial means disrespecting the dead.



14. Let us look in detail at the Kolappan's race against time in this film. Just before dawn, Kolappan receives the news of his father's death through his cell phone from his brother-in-law, soon after his father had passed away. A shocked Kolappan asks, "Did he die just minutes before at 4.30 a.m.?" Therefore, we can presume that the time he is informed could not be beyond 5 a.m..



His roommate offers to drive him in his motorbike to the bus station, and as they ride on the motorbike, the streets are still dark, and the vehicles have their headlights on, informing us it's before sunrise.





15. When his roommate offers to drive him all the way to his village, Kolappan refuses the man's kind gesture. Instead, he catches a bus and travels, informing us of the reasonable distance he has to travel to reach his village. On his arrival, he learns that upper-caste Hindus are denying them use of the path to the burial ground. Kolappan, along with his brother-in-law and friends plan to visit their advisor, Anna's house for guidance. They wait for one of their friends to join which results in a delay.

16. So when they reach Anna's house, they find that he had already left for Collector's/County Administrator's office. Anna's wife says that "they missed him just by five minutes." They know of Anna's commitments and presume it might take at least two hours for him to return from the Collector's office. The handheld camera during the above sequences suits the anguished movement of Kolappan.



17. Meanwhile, they go and meet the Police Inspector and the Revenue Divisional Officer. Their meeting is unproductive, and they return home and wait for Anna. When Anna arrives, it is already late in the day, and he says that nothing more could be done that day. He tells Kolappan that "they would start for Chennai very early morning next day" to meet his lawyer friend. They meet the committed lawyer (Karuna Prasad) who reads out the writ-appeal he has prepared on behalf of Kolappan. However, Kolappan expresses his apprehension that "it might take a long time" since court cases tend to prolong resolution. The lawyer says it is a writ of mandamus, which "is an order from a court to an inferior government official ordering the government official to properly fulfill their official duties or correct an abuse of discretion,"[19] and hence "they will get the verdict the same day." He asks them "to be in the court at 10 am."



18. The wall clock at his office shows the time is 7.40 a.m. They reach the court on time. After talking to the officials, the lawyer tells them that their case will be taken up in the afternoon. An anxious Kolappan reminds the lawyer that his father's body is lying unburied. The lawyer consoles him by saying that he will do what's needed. Unlike in the earlier sequences, the camera is on a tripod and remains steady inside the court during the above scene. The rare moments of steadiness in the film points to the thin ray of hope for justice in an utterly corrupt system due to the presence of the compassionate lawyer, who epitomizes a small minority of lawyers invested in the civil liberties of people on the fringes. The steadiness and the lawyer also bring solace to the despairing Kolappan. The anxieties of Kolappan, framed by the speedily moving handheld camera, seem to dissipate inside the court, due to hoping the possibilities of law and justice will bring balance, as emblemized by the steadiness of the camera on a tripod inside the court.

19. After the favorable verdict, as a goodwill gesture, Anna asks the lawyer to have coffee with them. But the lawyer refuses and urges them "to proceed immediately and not waste time" with such expressions of gratitude.



20. Meanwhile, on the third day, people in the village begin the preparation for the burial. Notices are posted everywhere announcing their victory in the court of law and the time when the funeral would take place.



21. The Police Inspector reminds Kolappan`s family that they have kept the body unburied for three days and thus puts the blame on them for this unnecessary delay.



22. Later the police do an about turn and threaten to take the body away by force. The villagers then take the body inside the hut.

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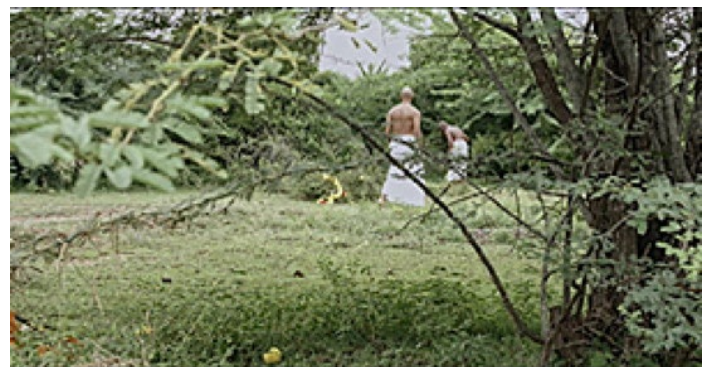
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Manusangada — visual essay continued



23. The Police warn those inside that “it would not even take five minutes to break open and enter the hut.” Outside Kolappan’s house, a television journalist with cameraman is recording her report on camera. She says that “they have been inside for three hours.” Later, inside the house, Kolappan’s girlfriend Revathi swoons due to feeling suffocated. We hear Kolappan’s relatives say that “the authorities had disconnected power for two hours, so the body kept in the freezer box might begin to rot.” They also express their concern about whether decomposition would provide an excuse for the police to take the body forcibly.

24. Finally, very late in the day, as they take the body in a procession to the burial ground, their journey is intercepted. A police constable says that “since morning they had not even drunk a cup of tea” and begs them to take the alternate path. After that, the body is snatched away from them, and Kolappan and his kin are taken into police custody. Around midnight (of the third day) they are released. One of the relatives, a woman, taken into custody by the police, says that they were released at 1 a.m. (of the fourth day). On the fourth morning, the wet roads remind us of the rain which fell late last night, and Kolappan now struggles to find the place of the burial by the arrogant and unlawful police.



25. Because he is a Dalit, his civil right—upheld by the court—is snatched away. In such a conclusion the film makes a poignant statement about the predicament of and injustice to Dalits: the injustice extends even after their death. The camera remains handheld during these final sequences, but slightly at a distance when compared to the earlier scenes, recalling the Third Cinema aesthetics of privileging the subjectivity of an oppressed community while at the same time offering a distance for us to contemplate their situation. This style changes at the very end when Kolappan falls on the ground and cries in a heartrending way.



26. Racing against time as a narrative ploy is ubiquitous in Tamil cinema, as instanced by the title of the late director Manivannan's film; *24 Mani Neram* (24 Hours, 1984) where the hero vows and takes revenge on his father's murderers within 24 hours. Similarly, the recent *Chennaiyil Oru Naal* (One Day in Chennai, dir. Shaheed Kadar, 2013), a remake of the critically acclaimed Malayalam film *Traffic* (dir. Rajesh Pillai, 2011), showcases the events that take place at Chennai on a single day – September 16. What distinguishes *Manusangada* is that, as illustrated above, its painstaking attention to the progression of time also is a meticulous depiction of the protagonist Kolappan's journey from his village to Anna's house in the vicinity and then to Chennai and back; the film sheds light on how the village itself has changed now. It is no more the village of yesteryears when Dalits were segregated and excluded from the village by being forced to live in a colony on the outskirts (Cheri).

Gradually the landscape of a Tamil village is changing and, with lands becoming scarce and expensive, it has one road at the center which passes through the village like the lifeline linking all the houses even as it divides them as separate rows on either side. Caste segregation, instead of disappearing with the colony at the fringes, is now even more strident as higher caste Hindus' capacity to block the road and deny others' passage means depriving the Dalits of their freedom to move through town, bringing their life to a standstill. In this context, Kolappan and his friends driving their motorcycles on the highway attains new meaning. The community of friends re-signifies the space, and it is juxtaposed against (their race against) time.

"On November 4, 1948, [the unparalleled Dalit intellectual and leader, Dr. Babasaheb] Ambedkar said, 'What is a village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism.'" [20] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

His words resonate with Kolappan's village even after sixty years of independence. Nothing much has changed in terms of upper-caste prejudices, communalism, and virulence. Many contemporary Dalit intellectuals have pointed to the Brahmin and upper-caste hegemony in cities and their domination of state institutions and how this dominance deprives Dalits of their legitimate right for education and jobs. For example, the preeminent contemporary Dalit intellectual, Anand Teltumbde, in his critique of the ethnic violence which Hindutva forces inflicted on the Muslims (and Dalits) during the Gujarat carnage, points to the Bania-Brahmin nexus. [21] But *Manusangada* uses a village, which is anticipating its transition into a small town in these times of globalization, for its narrative. Thus I would argue that by interrogating the predicament of Dalits in an in-between space, between a metropolis like Chennai and a typical village in southern Tamilnadu, *Manusangada* foregrounds even more clearly the fascistic tendencies of the upper caste and the oppression of Dalits in contemporary India with its unabashed policies of liberalization and privatization and the slogan of "India on the move."

## The community of friends in *Manusangada*

Generally, in Tamil films, the hero's friend plays a significant role. He often acts as an ambassador between the hero and his lady love, and he tries to bring about a solution when the hero is caught in the throes of conflict and misunderstanding. In most Tamil films, he is also the virtuous and highly supportive sidekick. Films with big stars generally replace the sidekick with a group of friends. They contribute to the comedy plotline, for instance in the films of Kamal Hassan, or they act as henchmen in attacking a gang of villains, as in the films of Tamil cinema's action heroes like Rajinikanth, Vijay, and Ajit.

*Manusangada* too uses the trope of a community of friends but repurposes it to mark a community's strength against a corrupt and oppressive society. This film's spatiality, like its temporality, is also insightfully and compellingly designed. In fact, *Manusangada* is more invested in depicting communal space than geographical.



In a spirit of protest, the film ends with a song to challenge and confront inequality and injustice: "Manusangada" by the leftist Tamil poet, the late Inquilab:

"We are humans, hey, we are humans  
Our anatomy is the same as every one of you.  
Do you think we have no iota of self-respect?  
Do you expect us to prostrate before your whims?  
Does your soil become impure when we till it?  
Does the food you get through our toil turn impure?  
How do you imagine our corpse impure and yours pure?  
(Manusangada/We are humans, hey, we are humans)  
Our fond dreams, why, our lives too float with the feces we  
clean in the sewage  
Our huts sail in the floods with garbage  
Our cries for help reach deaf ears  
Caste enmity doesn't spare killing of one's own daughter  
On the railway track, our bodies are strewn like wastes  
(Manusangada/We are humans, hey, we are humans)."[22]

Inquilab's poem has not only inspired the film's title and rebellious spirit to take on the might of the higher caste establishment and the state but also the ensemble spirit of the film's narrative and visual style. We never see heroics from Kolappan. Instead, we experience the spirit of his community, symbolized by his close group of friends both at Chennai and in the village.

Towards this end, it strives to juxtapose its various characters, mostly in groups of three, four or more, vs. oppressive forces in the following locales: state bureaucracies, the path through town that leads to the burial ground, and the interior and exterior of Kolappan's home, when the police surround those inside as a threatening dark force. Despite the foreboding tone cast by the oppressive power of the upper-caste townspeople and the state, there is a humane space that *Manusangada* harnesses from the beginning. Visually we see the mobilization of friends and family at every moment of crisis, and this kind of dramatic blocking sheds light on the film's investment in the collective voice of the Dalits as a sociopolitical force that is on the move; unlike in the past, this collective force cannot be suppressed. If narrative/social/physical temporality forces Kolappan and his people to rush against time and submit to the verticality of hierarchical caste oppression, the clustered spatiality of friends and (extended) family provides Kolappan a space of solace, comfort, and support to fight the injustice and inequality.



27. In terms of cinematography, the consistent use of a wide-angle lens allows for the continued presence of one or other friends in the frame to emphasize their unity for a common cause—to help Kolappan against the ruthlessly brutal acts that prevent the burial. The script sets up two sets of friends in Chennai where the workers share accommodation. When they learn about the death of Kolappan's father, they worry if he has money for funeral expenses, and one of them drops him at the bus stand on his bike. Later, two of them are at Kolappan's house in the village and have come from the city to participate in the mourning. Also, two of Kolappan's friends from the village stay by him once he lands up in the village. They follow him like his shadow; one of them Murugan (Vidhur) had a mother who had died a few months ago. Murugan too wanted to take her body for burial via the common pathway, but the police had intervened. They seized the body the second day saying it was not kept frozen, and that was the reason why Kolappan ensured that a body-freezer arrive on time.



28. The friends go with Kolappan to meet the Revenue Divisional Officer, the Police Inspector and the do-gooder Anna. They do not accompany him to court since they know he is taken care of by Anna, their leader. Otherwise, they stay with Kolappan on all the three days. During the third day, when the electric power supply is cut, Murugan suspects that the police cut the power so as to build a similar case against his family and snatch this body by force as well. The same friends are also charged and taken in the police van when they protest the atrocities at the seizure of the casket and are last seen in the film when released by police at midnight. However, they do not go with Kolappan to the burial site on the fourth morning as his ritual, called *Pal Theliyal*/Sprinkling of milk, is meant only for relatives. The extreme solidarity they show as a group, their understanding of caste disparity, their questioning attitude, and their belief in non-violence all stand in sharp contrast to the violent hostility of the higher-caste Hindus and the bureaucracy.

*Manusangada*'s importance lies in the Dalit perspective of its narration, as the film is structured through Kolappan's subjectivity. This is in contrast to earlier Tamil films which often centered around caste disparities, but those films looked down from the top at the Dalit issue, focusing on the upper-caste characters' point of view. And often in those films, seeming villains ill-treat the Dalits but are reformed by the end as they take pity on the poor.



For instance, Tamil cinema's preeminent film director K. Balachander's *Ummal Mudiyum Thambi* (You Can Do It, Bro! 1988). Murugadasa's *Nandhanar* (Murugadasa, 1942) is the classic prototype of this genre. Other significant films include *Bharati Kannamma* (Cheran, 1997) and the poignant *Kaadhal* (Love, Balaji Sakthivel, 2004) in which the girl's community of the upper-caste Hindus will not let her reciprocate a Dalit boy's love, and this denial of true love leads him to insanity. In that film, finally, as if to atone for the sins of the community, the husband to whom the girl gets forcibly married steps in to take care of the Dalit. In contrast to that kind of condescending plotline, the film *Oruthi* was remarkable as it was the first Tamil film to entirely adopt a Dalit perspective.

*Manusangada* incorporates the Dalit perspective in both its script and its visual presentation. For example, it meticulously juxtaposes Dalit subjectivity against the gnawing presence of the upper caste in Dalit lives by framing both groups together in long shots, as in the scene of the failed funeral procession. As the body is taken out on to the main path for burial, the upper caste people silently/connivingly witness from their houses in the background when the body is snatched away by the police.





29. Dalit subjectivity in *Manusangada* is also expressed by the sound of the *Parai* (drum), a symbol of the specificity of Tamil Dalits. Within that community, this sound encompasses the history of their oppression and their voices of rebellion, besides being the instrument for expressing their joy and grief. *Manusangada* aesthetically incorporates *Parai* discourse as part of its Dalit expressiveness. *Parai*, which is more popularly known in Tamil as *Thappu*—an onomatopoeic word, recalling the sound the *Parai* drum makes when struck—is not appreciated by all Dalits, however.[23] Some want to disassociate themselves from it because they think it reinforces the caste identity/hierarchy, but others believe the drum reasserts their tradition and identity as part of their sociocultural politics. *Manusangada* thus refrains from a stereotypical use of *Thappu* as an instrument of mourning. Instead, *Thappu* is used for celebration. After the court scene, one of the friends (Anand Sampath) in the village tells Kolappan's brother-in-law that *Thappu* players will be brought in to celebrate the verdict. Although Kolappan's brother-in-law cautions against angering the brooding Hindus who lost their case in court, while *Thappu* is being played, Kolappan responds spontaneously by feverishly dancing to its beat as a release to his pent-up grief.



Thus, through a carefully constructed script, detailed characterizations, and meticulous attention to form, *Manusangada* fills a void in Tamil cinema—the previous lack of a film with finesse and commitment to a cause.

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## To Let: a small family in a big city

*To Let* (dir. Ra. Chezhian, 2017), too, engages with time and space in a unique way. It depicts the restrictions on and constraints of urban family life in a realist way yet unseen in Tamil cinema. Early in the film, the unsympathetic, avaricious, middle-aged female apartment owner (Aathira Pandilakshmi) asks the protagonist Elango (Santhosh Sriram) who lives with his wife Amudha (Suseela) and five-year-old son Siddharth aka Siddhu (Dharun) to vacate his small single-bedroom apartment.



The playful Siddhu with Elango and Amudha.



Amudha asks Elango to take care of the dosai (rice crepe) on the hot griddle.



Amudha gets ready to meet the landlady.



The indifferent landlady is lost in television.



A nervous and anxious Amudha giving reason for their absence in the evening – explaining their trip to the beach.



On seeing the heavily roasted rice crepe, Amudha flares up.



Amudha informs Elango about the landlady's notice to vacate.



Siddhu is busy playing the lion and mouse game.

*To Let*, as the title indicates showcases the couple's persistent, unproductive journey for rental housing in the concrete jungle of Chennai. The director Chezhian Ramalingam (aka Ra. Chezhian) has a career as a leading cinematographer of contemporary Tamil cinema; his critically acclaimed, award-winning films include *Kalloori* (College, dir. Balaji Sakthivel, 2007), *Thenmerku Paruvakattru* (Southwest Monsoon, dir. Seenu Ramasamy, 2010), *Paradesi* (Vagabond, dir. Bala, 2013), and *Joker* (dir. Raju Murugan, 2016). *To Let* marks Chezhian's debut as a director, and on this film, he is also writer and cinematographer. In his work as a cinematographer, he has worked on exceptional films in Tamil mainstream cinema, and even his dance sequences are not the stereotypical masala (spicy) attractions wherein young men and women gyrate before the camera. He has also picked films with scripts superior to the regular fare of melodrama, comedy, and horror of much Tamil cinema.



With *To Let*, Chezhiyan makes a bold move by moving further from the center, particularly at a time when he is in demand as a cinematographer in the prolific and lucrative Tamil film industry. He marks himself as an uncompromising artist, invested in exploring cinema as an art form and pushing its limits. For example, *To Let* has no scored music track, usually a core element of Tamil cinema. Apart from the sparse dialogue, the soundscape incorporates effects both diegetic and non-diegetic. The absence of a background score is even more unusual considering Chezhiyan is trained in Western classical music and has comprehensively written about it in Tamil, mainly for students interested in learning it. And his wife Prema, producer of the film, herself runs a school in Chennai for Western classical music.

By layering a soundtrack where these songs stand out amidst ambient sound, he is also able to punctuate the nostalgia surrounding these songs, for they provide a much-needed deceleration of pace and offer solace in a global city, which abounds with people's dreams, expectations, and uncertainties. The old recycled songs are heard in the background during key moments of reflection in the film, and they range from the nostalgic and mellifluous *Maalai Pozhudhin Mayakathile*: "While entranced by this alluring evening" to *En Vaanilae Orae Vennilaa*: "The solitary moon in my sky." While the former is heard through an (offscreen) television set, the latter emanates from the transistor radio in the house. Both the songs provide space for enchantment and fascination with the infinite sky, dusk, moon, and stars, away from confinement within walls and a dreary, uncertain life. Here nostalgia refers less to the longing for a past home than to an association with places where Ilango and Amudha were happy, ensconced within the spaces of lovers' dreams.

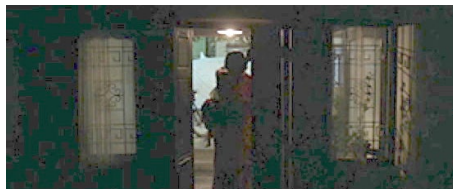
During the first decade of the new millennium, particularly in 2007, the arrival of the multinational companies led to the boom in the IT industry at Chennai city in South India.

This led to the sudden and disproportional rise in rents due to the housing needs of the IT personnel with fat pay cheques.

People working in other sectors and particularly the working class were hit the hardest.

*To Let* as the title indicates is about the journey of searching a place to live in Chennai when a nuclear family is given notice by a stern landlady to vacate in a month's time. "To Let" indicates an announcement in English rather than Tamil of places available on rent in Chennai. It not only stands for the content of the eagerly awaited signboards/billboards of the (single bedroom) apartment space the protagonists Ilango and Amudha are looking for, but also symbolizes their anxieties, expectations, and apprehensions.

More important, it also epitomizes the predicament of contractual laborers/labor in these times of globalization where everything is for sale to a (long) distant buyer/boss who is invisible but pulls the strings. The very fourth minute of the film the doorbell rings and by the 7th minute we come to know that Ilango, Amudha, and Siddharth have to vacate the flat. Thereafter, the doorbell becomes a source of anxiety as the landowner, and the prospective tenants keep barging in and out of their small home, where the owner lives on the floor above.



The sparse living room reveals the smallness of the place that the main door opens into. From the entrance to the left is the door to the bedroom where Amudha enters to change into her nightie, and at the far end of the house, beyond the living room, to the left is the toilet and to the right is the narrow hallway to the small kitchen. Through successive shots, the constrained space inside the home is established through the movement of the characters. The interiority of the characters is simultaneously revealed as they move through the various rooms/places within their home: As Amudha goes inside the door (of the bedroom) to change, Ilango gets busy with draining the clogged toilet.



Amudha switches on the transistor radio.

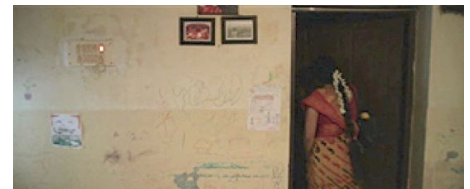


A moment of intimacy between Amudha and Elango in the closeted space by the side of their kitchen.



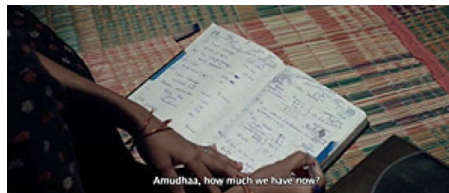
Amudha listening to an old film song, *Maalai Pozhudhin Mayakathile*/While entranced by this alluring evening, from television.

After the initial title cards, the film begins with Amudha and Ilango with the sleeping Siddharth, who is resting his head on his dad's shoulder, entering their home. The screen is dark initially with scattered light filtering in through the window screens on either side of the main door, and Amudha comes in, followed by Ilango and Siddharth, and switches on the light. The film then informs us of the form it will adopt for the film. *To Let* is invested in an aesthetic of realism through the focus on place as well as space. Through fragments that are cut in linear coherence as the three primary actors move in the house after they return, the interiority of their home as well their characters are revealed to us.



In the meanwhile, Siddharth who was playing with the cardboard fan, picks up the change from his father's shirt pocket, by climbing on the chair by the wall, and runs into the far right and puts them in his money bank, which is a small terracotta ball-shaped savings box, sitting on a grocery stand, constructed with cement, on the wall near the kitchen.





There is off and onscreen action in the short hallway to the kitchen wherein Ilango drinks water from a pot and enters the kitchen (offscreen). Through the sound and shadows on the wall, we see Ilango's advances and Amudha's (willing) reluctance, giving the awake Siddharth as her reason for hesitancy. She comes in, onscreen, and reacts, expressing her shyness at the moment of intimacy; Ilango had tried to steal a kiss (off-screen) inside the kitchen. Then Ilango enters the frame and stands across from her, his back to the camera, as she expresses her thanks for the outing (to the beach). Then the electricity goes off, and when it comes back on, the doorbell rings, the landlady's daughter enters and says that her mother wants Amudha to come upstairs.

At this point, Amudha removes the garland of jasmine flowers on her head before she leaves. The jasmine flower is highly significant in Tamil culture, an expression of joy and festivity, beauty and happiness, more importantly of romance and (an invitation to) love. The fact that Amudha chooses not to reveal her delighted state of mind, even as she informs the landlady of her trip to the beach with her husband and son, tells us the owner is happy to see the tenant cringe with the banality of their life. The landlady curtly asks Amudha to vacate in a month's time. In this way *To Let* initiates its rushing-against-time scenario; they have to leave by the 4th of May, now marked on the family calendar. And indeed, the month-long story of the film ends precisely on the morning of the 4th of May.

The deadline to vacate hangs even more heavily because the haughty landlady is contemptuous of her tenants and belittles them at every opportunity. Temporal urgency is set right away as the hook for the audience to identify and empathize with the main characters. Amudha's mood changes when she comes down from the landlady's home, and she behaves curtly with Ilango. First, she gets angry when he leaves the dosa (rice crepe) on the cast iron skillet too long despite her telling him to pay attention to it when she went up, and then she scolds and vents her anger on Siddharth who is wearing the paper-mache mask of a lion and wants to play with Ilango. Amudha then takes out her annoyance on the heavily roasted dosa that is sticking to the pan by aggressively taking it out with the spatula and throwing it the trash can nearby. Earlier, when the electric supply gets cut momentarily, in the darkness Siddharth asks whether his dad is afraid of the dark or the huge dinosaur; Ilango says no to both. Then the boy mocks his dad by querying whether he is scared of his mom. Ilango bears the brunt of Amudha's anger in the scene, as he too feels helpless and angry. He had expected the usual three months' notice. The playful Siddharth sneaks in and names his game with a mask as the lion and the mouse game. The masked lion, whose fortune depends on the swings in a global economy, terrorizes the helpless mouse.

The storyline begins by contrasting a couple's highs and lows. They do not have a steady flow of income, just like most contract workers in a global economy. Their quotidian happiness with an outing to a beach is cut short by a notice to vacate. Nonetheless, the couple's intimacy, left mainly offscreen for us to imagine, and their togetherness as a close-knit family come through strongly. This especially happens because of the visual focus on fragmented places to stage the mise-en-scene. Filming in narrow places, informing us of the restricted rooms and hallway, let us understand that the characters encounter each other in close proximity throughout the film whatever be their mood. The places are also indicative of the spaces of hope and despair. When Ilango drinks a glass of water from the stainless-steel pot, the song that is played in the transistor-radio on the nearby stand in the narrow hallway to the kitchen gives us a glimpse into the interiority of Amudha, who is offscreen in the kitchen:

"En Vaanilae Orae Vennilae  
Kaadhal Megangal Kavidhai Thaagarai  
Oorvalam...  
The solitary moon in my sky  
The clouds of love and the poetic star  
on a procession."

As the song is almost played in its entirety, across changing images that keep Amudha at the center, the editing plus the continuous song underscore how these small fragments of the place called home that we have just witnessed are the space that makes up her entire world. Within the confined space her subjectivity contains the endless sky and the moon, and the stars and the passing clouds. We realize that Amudha's heart revolves around her husband (the Hindu) Ilango, for whom she had cut off her links with her (Christian) family, and their son Siddharth, who is intelligent and creative. Even if she admonishes the little boy for drawing on the walls, she is also proud of his creativity. Indeed, later, in a scene where Ilango arrives late from work, Amudha informs him about the child's school award and shows the certificate of merit for "Art" won by Siddharth, from his Ravindra Bharathi "Global" school.

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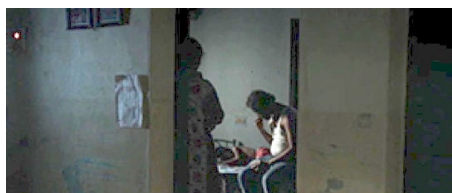
# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## To Let visual essay, continued



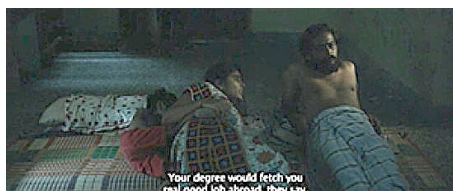
When Ilango arrives late from work, Amudha informs him about the award and shows the certificate of merit for “Art” won by Siddharth, from his Ravindra Bharathi “Global” school.



She also says that Siddharth was awake for a long time to share his joy with his dad. The global city, thus, intrudes into their life and colors their dream, through its assurance of “giving wings to the thoughts” of Siddharth and the promise of a better future for him.



Amudha also expresses her hope that Siddharth will go abroad in the future and marry a girl of his choice.

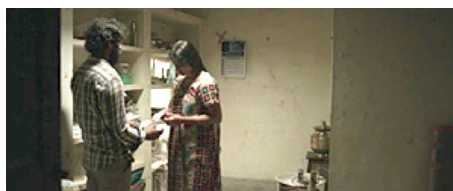


In a crucial moment in the film, Amudha asks Ilango if he could go abroad, with his deserving qualifications, and work for two years so that they could buy a house and be economically secure before he follows his dreams of becoming a film director.



She shares such thoughts regarding the future when she is lying on the bed near Ilango, who is sitting up and watching a film on (the offscreen) television. He gets irritated by her interruptions. At this point, the offscreen sound reveals that the scene he watches is from *Andrei Rublev* (dir. Andrei Tarkovsky, 1966)—the scene when the proper clay has been selected for building a mold for the bronze bell. It is important to note that 2007 was also the time when global art cinema in its pirated DVD versions at an affordable cost was easily available in Chennai.

Earlier, at the beginning of the film, Ilango also alludes to a probable assignment which might take them abroad. But the film pits their tender dreams, almost like the bubbles inside the warmth of their sparse home, against the rough edge of the gritty and callous city.



Elango brings a smile on Amudha's face when he gives her the money, he got from dubbing for a mainstream film.



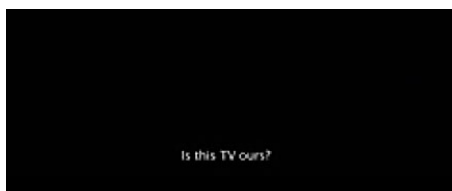
A moment of solace in each other's arms even as the notice to vacate has unsettled their mundane life.



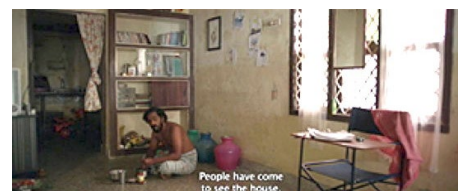
A pensive Amudha discussing the possibilities for her to work and contribute.



About one-third of the way in, the film again uses punctuation with darkness—the electricity



“If the television and the scooter (which we constantly use) are ours, why not this home?”



In fact, when the prospective tenants barge in without any notice, just after ringing their

is cut when Siddharth is on Ilango's lap watching television. In that darkness, we hear Siddharth, as usual asking his father questions...

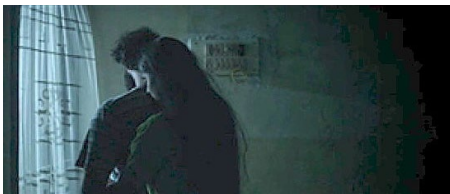


...Ilango and Amudha stand frozen in a corner, feeling humiliated as their privacy is intruded upon, particularly when they are eating a meal.



Literally, one of the curious tenants opens the door to the dresser on the wall.

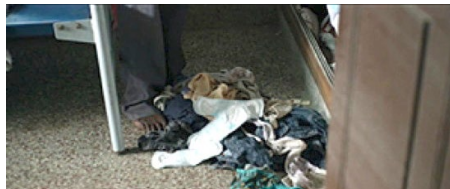
Gradually, however, the place inside this apartment's four walls also becomes a space filled with anxieties of displacement and despair; one door after the other keeps closing in on them, on one pretext or another. Their encounters outside occur in a world literally on the move, where construction abounds and "To Let" signboards are aplenty. That space is juxtaposed against the intensifying inner turmoil that Ilango and Amudha feel and the increasing claustrophobia within their home. Consider, for instance, the penultimate scene, the night before they have to leave, the night of May 3rd. A long take shot with a wide-angle lens frames the uneasy and much worried Amudha, who is unable to control her emotions as she is weeping and Ilango is sitting by her side consoling her, while Siddharth is sleeping on the floor resting his head on a pillow in the adjacent room.



This question sums up the predicament of millions of families who want to live in the concrete jungle of a metropolis like Chennai, but the city is indifferent to their plea regarding their emotional investment in a home.



Even worse, later Amudha covers herself with her wet *Paavadai* (undergarment worn under the saree) after a bath and comes out casually expecting the door to be shut as usual. She is shocked (by an offscreen guest at an odd hour) and dismayed at such denying of their dignity as tenants.

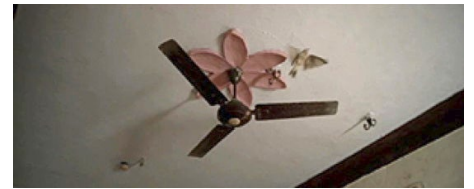


Amudha cringes as she feels molested while a stranger is looking at her undergarments and menstrual pads that fall on the floor.

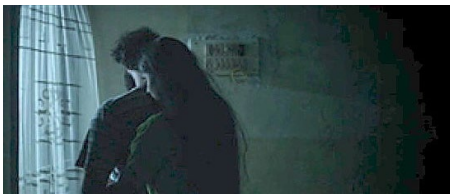
doorbell, .....



This happened because the landlady retains the right to the key to their house. She opens the bolts and lets in interested tenants any time of the day. "When you go out, give the key to me," she demands.



Nevertheless, when their repeated efforts to find an alternative accommodation fail, Amudha suggests to Ilango if they should ask the landlady whether they can continue to stay by paying a higher rent.



This profound static shot of the family captures the emotions that stand in contrast to the many cuts of fragmented places inside their home in the beginning which were full of the many colors of their vibrant emotions, joy and grief, anxiety and anger, and desires and dreams. As they fail to successfully negotiate getting another accommodation proclaiming "To (be) Let," the signboard "To Let" outside their own home on the gate also speaks to the conditions more generally for contract workers. Ilango has had sparse takers for his creative talents. In fact, he could get the attention of and pitch his story only to one solitary producer (Marudhu Mohan), despite his desire "To Let" his services as a writer/director in the big city of Chennai and its colossal film industry.



## To Let and place

"Global totality cannot be thought without reckoning the local specificity. In other words, place in its specific concreteness, does not act as a hurdle to abstract and generalizing thought but instead is the means through which such thought is able to articulate and materialize itself. This is the inversion of the bumper sticker's imperative to 'think globally; act locally'; rather to think locally, [Fredric] Jameson suggests, is to make way for the possibility of acting (and, of course, continuing to think) globally." [25]

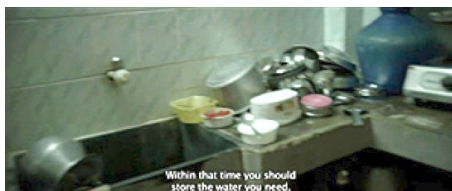
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*To Let* is anchored locally through its focus on place, which is but one specific aspect of space, in its critique of the globalizing metropolis, Chennai. This is represented in the script not only through the aspirations of Ilango and Amudha for a better future for Siddharth through the "Global" school where he studies, but also by the script which a producer of an advertisement (Marudhu Mohan) asks Ilango to write—a video advertising *maa vadu*/tender-mango pickle. The producer tells him about facing competition from three other pickle firms. In fact, demand for pickles, particularly from Chennai, has increased over the last decade, mainly due to exports that cater to the large population of non-resident Indians in the West, most of whom work in the information technology sector. *To Let* addresses through local produce—the tender-mango pickle and its rising global demand—something which is directly proportional to the scarcity of rented places in Chennai due to the rapid expansion of the IT sector. Thus, the film could be argued to "think locally and act globally," not just in terms of its narrative but regarding the objects foregrounded by the film.

Reflexively, the tender-pickle seems to be an allegory for the film itself. Chezhiyan's *To Let*, as an art film with an unhurried pace, does not pretend to be a "different" film within the mainstream. It is entirely different in its approach and aesthetics. These conscious choices also mark *To Let* as a film made for the festival circuit and an international audience, along with an appeal to the multiplex audiences in India who may have preferences for cinema which disavows stereotypes and explores new styles and themes, expanding how film can narrate hitherto untold stories in a fresh language. Here the transnational objective of *To Let* is predicated on a local theme/subject at the same time that the difficulty of finding accommodation is universal, particularly for a struggling filmmaker with an unstable income. In this aspect, the script implicitly invokes Nimai Ghosh and his efforts to unionize film workers in Tamilnadu and recalls the theme of Ghosh's pathbreaking film *Pathai Theriyuthu Paar* (Look at the New Path!), based on the subject of workers organizing themselves. But the fact that Ilango eats nonvegetarian food, a signifier of not belonging to the upper caste, means he's denied accommodation, and this fact is specific to the local culture and its prejudices related to religion and caste. By anchoring the agony of its protagonists to place, *To Let* seems to reaffirm the significance of this specific place in the lives of its rather ordinary protagonists; their life exemplifies the lived reality of most middle-class people in India, where identities like caste and religion are visual signifiers used to keep vulnerable people segregated and at a distance.



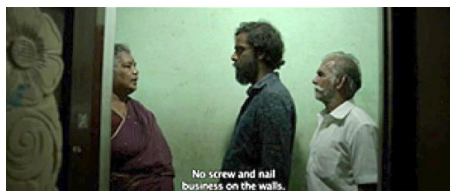
The initial search of Ilango for a new place is framed by a fluid subjective shot, through a handheld camera, of the rooms inside the apartment he's looking at, where the camera moves along with Ilango through a dimly-lit narrow hallway into the apartment on the left and continues to pan onto a gloomy living room with a window and goes towards a kitchen revealing the sink with the vessels to be washed.



And then she says that there will be only one hour in the evening when water will be available to collect and store; that's when she puts on the motor.



On the soundtrack, during the above long take, we hear a woman's authoritative voice telling matter-of-factly the cost for rent (4000 Rupees rent and 40000 advance) and other cumulative details (maintenance 500 and electricity 6 Rupees per unit).



In the following shot, the owner of the voice/place is revealed—the tough landlady, Ramuthai. As we see her in the frame with Ilango and the broker, she cautions against using nails on the walls and playing the TV at a



"This is the product."



"Pickles, sir?"

The producer also alerts Ilango about the competition from three other firms. The demand for pickles, particularly from Chennai, has increased over the last decade, mainly due to the exports to cater to the larger population of non-resident Indians in the West, most of whom work in the information technology sector. *To Let* addresses through the local produce of the tender-mango pickle, its rising global demand, which is directly proportional to the scarcity of rented places in Chennai from 2007 onward, due to the rapid expansion of the IT sector as the film informs us at the beginning. Thus, the film could be argued to "think locally and act globally," not just in terms of its narrative but regarding the objects foregrounded by the film.



She also says that she will charge 300 Rupees extra for Kolam, the traditional rice flour-drawing in front of the house around a grid pattern of dots which is considered auspicious in Tamil/most Indian culture. She also warns that rent may go up after eleven months when the contract has to be renewed.



The name Ramuthai and her preference for the goddess Mariamman and her language marks her as someone from the lower rung of the caste hierarchy, yet she is revealed to be pragmatic and not concerned with the plight of a fellow

loud volume. As she says this, her cell phone rings with a loud dial tone of a song on Mariaththa/Goddess Mari. The sequence is thus framed in the beginning by showing the calendars of gods and goddesses outside on a wall near a temple, where the real estate broker joined Ilango on his moped; and it is bookended by the sound of the religious song at the end.

human being; she's overwhelmed by the opiate of religion, her insulation against any guilt about exploitation.



The protagonist's subsequent search for a place to rent is framed by a fluid POV shot as well. This time we see the old broker under a tree with a *To Let* signboard ...



...leading Ilango to the spot through an alley, where we see a woman pumping water from a borewell.



Thereafter, the camera moves through a narrow staircase to reveal a young girl who is watering a plant in a vase on the sidewall above.



The continuously moving subjective camera opens onto a terrace where boys sitting on steps are reading their lessons about Tenali Raman, the 16th-century poet known for his wit and wisdom in his critique of a self-centered society and its avariciousness.



Then we hear the sound of an offscreen man as he reads news about the successful recruitment for training in Vedas, the Hindu scriptures. As the moving camera pans right, we see a young woman arranging clothes to dry on a cord, and a man across her sitting at the entrance to his home reading from a newspaper about Sunita Williams and her participation in the Boston Marathon from a treadmill in the space station orbiting the earth.



The moving camera pans and moves left to reveal a narrow room enclosed by walls, and the scene ends with off-screen dialogue: When Ilango expresses his shock at and disapproval of the common toilet, the broker tells him, "That's what you can expect for the money you're willing to pay."

The dimly-lit, restricted spaces and narrow staircase in both these subjective scenes from Ilango's point of view emphasize place, sending the message that you can't escape these constraints without money in a big city. These subjective shots, in fact, offer an objective look at the houses Ilango could afford to rent. The realistic images imply that this is the reality of the vast majority of people whose lives have not been touched by the affluence or upward mobility, promised by globalization, and ironically by the advertisement industry Ilango works for. The smooth handheld camera work reflexively draws our attention not only to the anxious tenant Ilango who is looking for a place to move, but also to the aspiring filmmaker in him. He too could design such a shot in this digital era where steady camera movement is easily possible through affordable equipment like the Gimbal. In terms of film history, instead of a subjective shot mainly offering insight into the interiority of a character, here it contributes to an assemblage of observational shots, recalling the aesthetics of Neorealism—for instance, the famous long take at the vast thieves' market in *Bicycle Thieves*.

Moreover, the subjective shots in *To Let* do not privilege Ilango as the viewer but, through editing, directly reveal physical circumstances to us as an audience. The usual trajectory of a moving subjective shot is to immediately open up the space inside and draw us into the interiority of the character, here Ilango. But the editing here disavows that by the sharp ending of the sequence with the stern landlady and the constricting image of the folding toilet walls, due to the wide-angle lens. The visuals thus layer subjectivity to punctuate the ever-widening gap between the characters' dreams and the hardcore reality surrounding people like them in this "ever-shrinking global" world. Rather than emphasize the inner world of Ilango and the environment's effect on his psyche, these long-held shots reflexively draw attention to the effect such a disorienting glimpse of a claustrophobic apartment on lease would have on *any* prospective tenant. In this way, the emphasis on fragments of place, either empty or occupied by people who do not react to the moving camera, enables the cinematographer to frame a specific place for its universal resonance. According to film scholars Rhodes and Gorfinkel,

"Our experience of moving in and out of a moving image's emplaced geographic particularity and our ability through the image, to know places we can/not ever know grant us a model for an engagement with the world, which is both a world and worlds. The moving image offers us a means of placing ourselves in others' places, not to annihilate their specificity or ours, or the specificity of these places, but rather so that we find a way of finding in the world's manifold particularity a universality worth

sharing-everywhere.”[27]

Here, cinema’s emplaced geographic particularity also recalls and resonates with the lopsided urban development common in most countries of the Global South. The shots of residential urban locale delineate an outcome of the postcolonial world’s struggles to come to terms with the neo-colonization; a city like Chennai simultaneously profits and suffers from global outsourcing and consequent local exploitation by means of sweatshops. The juxtaposition of the moving camera and the fixity of a tangible place showcase the characters’ dreaming in a vacuum and disregarding grounded realities in aspiring for a world/place elsewhere.

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## To Let visual essay, continued



Thereafter, as Ilango is forced to rapidly search for a place due to the approaching deadline, Amudha and Siddharth join him.



At one point, when Ilango's moped reaches a spot where they see a *To Let* sign on the gate, Siddharth is happy. But as they expectantly approach the entrance, ...



... an old man stands there in his traditional attire of the *veshti*/a rectangular piece of white cloth worn around the waist, and *poonool*/a sacred thread across his chest, and a *namam*/a flame-like mark on his forehead, with his wife behind him in the *panchakacham*/five-yards saree; these clothes bespeak their religion (Vaishnava Hindu) and caste (Brahmin). The man comes out and asks: "Are you vegetarian?"



The scene ends with a silent and defeated Ilango and Amudha returning to their moped with Siddharth.

It is worth looking closely at this sequence's visual development. It begins with Ilango, Amudha and Siddharth on a moped behind a tracking camera in front of them, followed by a subjective shot in a wider frame of a spacious locality, a rarity because of the narrow-hallways and claustrophobic-rooms we have seen in *To Let*.



Looking from the side of Ilango's moped, a relatively wealthier place with houses surrounded by compound walls is established as the neighborhood. As the moped comes to a halt, Ilango sees the signboard "To Let," and this spontaneously leads him to inquire of the old owner, who is coming out of his home, the status of the accommodation. But the old man's counter question crushes Ilango and Amudha's hopes. We learn in this way that Ilango and his family are nonvegetarians and so are rejected by the vegetarian upper-caste Brahmin, whose attire loudly asserts his exclusivity/supremacy.



Thus, the brief moment of relief through seeing a wider frame and the relatively spacious houses comes to a halt when literally Ilango is shown his place and alerted to the grim reality of his being an outsider in that place. The roomy place with a compound wall now becomes, as we saw the old man framed between the gate and the main door to his house, a source of rejection. There is "emplaced geographic particularity" and caste specificity—of both the old man inside his compound wall and Ilango, Amudha, and Siddharth on the street outside. But this sequence, with all its local specificity, then has a resonance with the universality of color and race segregation; within the film, it recalls an earlier scene where the old broker apprehensively asked if Ilango was a Muslim.

Such discrimination where religion and caste intersect extends to a subsequent scene where the Hindu landlord is from the Saiva Vellalar caste. Here the setting is a living room. The landlord wears vibhuthi/the religious marking of white ash on his forehead, and we see a calendar on the adjacent wall with an image of V.O. Chidambaram Pillai, a rebel against the British now appropriated as an icon for Pillai's caste followers. These visual indicators clearly show that the landlord is upper caste but not a Brahmin.



The landlord's tone is suspicious and unfriendly from the beginning as he cynically asks: "Do you pray?" He further says admonishingly: "Do not wear the black shirt." By that, he is referring to the black shirt as the emblem of the spirit of the rationality of Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, an iconic social reformer who rebelled against blind faith and religion and the caste system and its



Further, when the conservative landlord arrogantly interrogates his prospective and silent/ humiliated tenant and expresses his disgust at his working in the film industry, the compassionate Selva (T. Arul Ezhilan) who had arranged the meeting comes to the rescue of his friend and tries to salvage the situation by saying that Ilango is a creative author who

oppression.

Nonetheless, the landlord seems to be cold and indifferent as he asks them to have a look at the house on the adjacent street. Next day when Ilango and his friend meet him to pay the advance, the opportunistic landlord tells them that he has taken an advance from an IT guy — meaning someone who has a more stable and higher income. In this scene, though the apartment is spacious, it is hostile and antagonistic. Despite the well-lit atmosphere, a gloom pervades it from the beginning due to the malicious nature of the upper-caste landlord who seems to hate Ilango and makes him feel unwelcome. Despite the spacious and well-furnished living room, it's a place where Ilango feels disrespected and confined due to his social and economic disadvantage.



The oppressed Ilango's state of mind, which is seething with anger, is punctuated by images at key moments in the film. ...

writes scripts. Later when the landlord directly asks about Ilango's caste, Selva lies by saying he is from the (vegetarian) Saiva Vellala caste.



... For instance, Ilango watches a house being demolished when he is on his moped on the road after a quarrel with Amudha at home.

The focus on place in *To Let*, through Ilango's searches, thus travels the range of castes as well; the initial landlady seems to be from a relatively lower caste whereas the last two are from the top of the hierarchy. But Ilango's caste combined with his class or weak economic power makes him an "undesirable" candidate to find an accommodation in Chennai, where multiple layers of discrimination always shape social interaction in any given place at every instance.

## To Let and space



The last segment of the film focuses both on place and on Ilango's interiority as the approaching deadline to vacate does not give him any reprieve. The characters are juxtaposed against various places to evoke their interiority. For example, almost halfway through the film, around the 44th minute, Ilango participates in making an ad for cherry tomatoes. As a shot is being set up, the director of that ad film (Mani) has a chat with Ilango. When Ilango tells him about the difficulty of getting an apartment due to his working in the film industry, the director points out the hypocrisy. He says that Tamilians could trust the film industry people for fifty years to govern their state but cannot trust them for a (paltry) monthly rent.[28]  
[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)



Later, the director flashes a visiting card that reads "M. Sivakumar, Sys Analyst, Orchid Computers," and tells Ilango how in his case his cousin, who owns the company, helped him out. He justifies his deception of posing as a computer professional that he used to rent an apartment by saying, "after all we're going to pay the same rent" as others. He gives the card to Ilango, since "only the name will be changed" on the card.



This moment in the film was prefigured by an earlier sequence, when after returning from the old Brahmin's house, ....



... Ilango and Amudha are taken aback by the "To Let" signboard on their own gate. The innocent Siddharth is full of smiles and goes near the sign and loudly spells it out before going in.



In that sequence, when we see the signboard on the gate at their home, our attention is not on the place, which we are familiar with, but with the mindset of Ilango and Amudha. The rental sign presages the increasing turmoil they are going to endure due to the approaching deadline



This anxious feeling about the deadline stands in contrast to the more leisurely-paced subjective shot of the apartments for rent, where we could get a glimpse of the unaccommodating society at large.



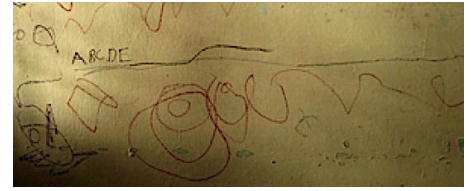
and the revelation of the fact that their home is now available for any taker.



The next shot is that of a scene from Bresson's *Pickpocket* (1959) on the television screen, where we see the protagonist approaching a crowd. Over the ringing of the doorbell, the film is paused on the television screen.



Later, Siddharth adds "To Let" to the painting of his home. Earlier, the painting was crushed by the haughty landlady when she took Amudha (and Siddharth) to task for the dirty walls and pulled the painting down and threw it away. Now, it was straightened by Ilango when he was ironing his clothes. The home drawn by pencils and crayons serves as a metaphor for the family's togetherness and resilience despite the odds.



Siddharth's paintings also provide a space into a child's mind as it is full of playfulness and eagerness to learn new letters but also gets affected by the atmosphere around.



In his school he struggles to answer the question, "What's your father?" With his family, as they leave the house the last time, Siddharth points to his painting of the plant, which now has a big flower, on the wall. Looking at it, Ilango smiles.



Siddharth's paintings provide a space for us to understand the child's cheerful and meditative mind, which is always in the present.



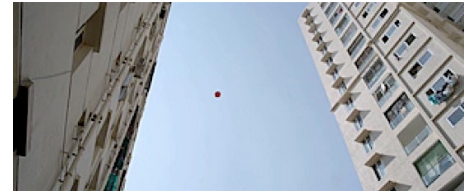
The child's subjectivity stands in contrast to that of his parents, who have been forced to dwell on the future with the sudden notice to vacate.



In a similar vein, the final segment of the film is also underscored by an image that parallels Ilango and Amudha's predicament.



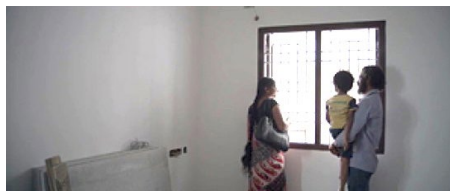
Between two skyscrapers, we see Siddharth standing with his mom and dad and letting go of his balloon.



As the balloon ascends towards the blue sky between the tall buildings, even as it offers a beautiful image, it also emphasizes loss for Siddharth.



The very next shot is that of Ilango, Amudha, and Siddharth crossing the road amidst goats and traffic to reach the North Indian Shantilal's new house under construction.



Shantilal and his wife are warm and welcoming, and the interior is well lit.



The kitchen is laid with granite and the walls with marble, and Amudha is happy with the house. It is a brief moment of hope.



The tensed Ilango immediately calls the ad film director so as to alert his cousin regarding the situation, but the director asks him to call him later as he is amidst a screening. The sequence is on a busy city road with heavy traffic at night, with Ilango and his parked moped in the foreground. This creates the space for reflection on his uneasiness and portends the impending



But the cautious owner postpones taking the advance, as he wants to discuss with his wife. Later, when Ilango meets him in his office, Shantilal asks him for 500 more that is 6000 Rupees as rent, and a reluctant Ilango agrees and pays him a token advance. He also asks for Ilango's ID and Employment Proofs, and Ilango gives a copy of his ration card and a visiting card. Unlike with the earlier encounter with landlords, none of the scenes in this sequence are staged at Shantilal's home where he lives. Subjectively, the space inside his new house seduces Ilango and Amudha and us. The cautious Shantilal, who confesses about his outsider status in Chennai, is picky and wants to check the veracity of Ilango's current tenancy.

As Ilango and Amudha are busy planning to leave and packing their goods, they are relieved when Shantilal says he is not able to make it to their residence.

But when everything seems to go well, Ilango's lie backfires and comes to haunt him. The night before their departure, since everything is packed, Ilango buys food at a roadside kiosk and is returning when his cellphone rings. We come to know from the conversation interrupted by the traffic that Shantilal wants to verify the employment of Ilango from the (fake) visiting card that he has given, as Ilango is telling him the phone number on the card.

loss of the promised place through the smoke and the cars which pass perilously close by in the yellowish sodium lamps, their color adding to the grimness of the situation. The noise of the traffic interferes with Ilango's talk, and his tone becomes increasingly anxious due to the decreasing charge on the sim-card in his cellphone. This scene is the climax of the film, as we can guess the consequences of Shantilal's verification. The frame uses the space of the big city at night as a canvas to paint its blues in regard to the people living on its fringes. Finally, *To Let* ends with the reversal of its very first shot: The camera is inside the living hall, and we see Amudha, leaving after Ilango and Siddharth on the morning of May 4th, going out, shutting the door, and locking it from outside, and the screen goes dark. *To Let* suggests through Ilango's earlier dialogue that they might leave the city. Or their search for a new house may continue.

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### Conclusion

Interestingly, the road becomes a signifier of exclusion in both the films. In *To Let*, it is a marker of the in-between space where Ilango, Amudha and their son Siddhu are finally displaced to when expelled from their home and from where they keep searching for a shelter throughout the film, but in vain. In *Manusangada*, the road signifies a stage where the unlawful and forcible exclusion of people, oppressed through caste, is played out with the connivance of the state. In a way, both the films engage with the idea of space and exclusion. If *To Let* revolves around the theme of dwelling, *Manusangada* focuses on the subject of resting in peace. Both themes are about universal quotidian desires, but in each case, the space to enact those desires is denied. If Ilango's unstable income as a film worker or his class is the dominant reason for exclusion in *To Let*, the ubiquitous and venomous prejudice surrounding caste becomes the cause of Kollappan's poignant situation in *Manusangada*. Ilango and Kolappan and their families bitterly signify "matter out of place," as they face a consistent effort to keep them out.

In this light, drawing from Mary Douglas's classical definition of dirt,[29] Mark Cousins rearticulates the revolutionary potential inherent in dirt,[30] particularly for the purposes of my essay, in the context of Kolappan's perseverance and persistence in claiming his rights to carry the bier through the official road and bury his father's body despite the attempts of the upper-caste people and the police to block/prohibit it:

"... in so far as dirt is matter out of place it must have passed a boundary, limit or threshold into a space where it should not be. The dirt is an ugly deduction from 'good' space, not simply by virtue of occupying the space, but by threatening to contaminate all the good space around it. In this light, 'dirt', the ugly object, has a spatial power quite lacking in the beautiful object" (p. 63)."[31] [[open endnotes in new page](#)]

However, the Dalit corpse and cortege represent a threatening intrusion and the beautifully decked object on the bier has a spatial power that is offensive to those with more power. Thus it is contained by the police as they snatch the body away and arrest Kolappan and his friends and relatives. Julia Kristeva's ideas on dirt also apply to the abject figure of the corpse in *Manusangada*,[32] which lies in a poor neighborhood adjacent to upper-caste houses. She furthers our understanding of such contiguity when her idea of abjection is expanded to consider spaces:

"The abject, in contrast with interpretations of Douglas that polarise the binary between 'dirty' and 'clean', leaves more room for the ideas that ... one might desire to see and experience abject spaces; that the marginalised may exist next to the mainstream, the excluded next to the included, and that degeneration might be produced within processes of regeneration. Abject urban [as well as rapidly transforming rural] spaces necessitate such an interpretation in accounting for interactions between notions of material, spatial, psychological, and social degradation and systems for imposing, or attempting to achieve, purity. Responses to stigmatised public spaces—including obsessive surveillance, the patrol of boundaries—parallel

the process of abjection on a collective scale.”[33]

To conclude, I would like to call attention to another vital space for such significant films as *Manusangada* and *To Let*—that of international film festivals. I have noted how the films fill a historical lack/void in Tamil cinema in terms of their innovative style, politically astute subject matter, and uncompromising stance on creating a film language that is historically informed yet unique to Tamil cinema. Both these films have done exceptionally well in the festival circuit and have won many awards. *Manusangada* was screened at the prestigious Cairo International Film Festival and in the highly competitive Mumbai Film Festival, besides being an official selection in the Indian Panorama section of the International Film Festival of India. Similarly, *To Let* too has traveled far and wide in the festival circuit from Armenia to Spain. It won the best picture award at the Kolkata International Film Festival and the Best Film in Tamil in the prestigious national awards. Nonetheless, both these films are yet to be released in the theaters in Tamilnadu. Because of media coverage and critical acclaim following their success in the festival circuit, Amshan Kumar and Chezhiyan are optimistic about the theatrical release of their films at home.

While digital technology has enabled the productions of quality films, digital distribution and exhibition are still monopolized, as before. A few men/groups/corporations control the fate of films in reaching an audience; the rich own/lease the real estate—the theatrical spaces. The rise of multiplexes has led to an increase in a discerning audience for art films, but at the same time, even highly deserving films made with modest budgets must make way for the films with big stars and transnational blockbusters. In such a situation, if Tamil cinema will see a renaissance in this digital age, it will need the patronage of discerning young viewers who go to cinemas in these times of live streaming and web uploads. I am hopeful that *Manusangada* and *To Let* can keep such an audience engaged.

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## Notes

Acknowledgments: I am grateful to directors Amshan Kumar and Ra. Chezhiyan for their time and Profs. Julia Lesage, Jyotika Virdi, Amit Baishya, and the peer reviewers for their responses.

Distribution: *Manusangada* and *To Let* were theatrically released in the cities of Tamilnadu and were well received. Now they are available on popular streaming platforms like Netflix (*Manusangada*) and Amazon Prime (*To Let*).

1. Chidananda Das Gupta, "New Directions in Indian Cinema," *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Autumn, 1980), p. 41. [[return to page 1](#)]
2. See for details, Theodore S. Baskaran, "A Language of Visuals," *Thehindu.com*, 20 Oct 2002, Accessed 16 Aug. 2018. See, <https://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/mag/2002/10/20/stories/2002102000100500.htm>
3. See for details, Swarnavel Eswaran Pillai, "Introduction," *Madras Studios: Narrative, Genre, and Ideology in Tamil Cinema* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2015), p. 15.
4. For Marudu Trotsky's views on the influences on early Tamil cinema, see "Marudu Trotsky on Art and Cinema," *Youtube.com*, 23 June 2018, Accessed 16 Aug. 2018. See, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmwgRN3fAXA>
5. Aruna Vasudev, *The New Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Macmillan, 1986).
6. See for details, Swarnavel Eswaran Pillai, "The 1970s Tamil Cinema and the Post-classical Turn," *South Asian Popular Culture*, Vol. 10, No. 1, p. 77.
7. Balu Mahendra, one of the filmmakers to influence Chezhiyan, also had a penchant for realism, as instanced by his movies *Veedu* and *Sandhya Ragam*. In his critically acclaimed film *Veedu*, Balu Mahendra touches upon the problems associated with rent in the urban space of Chennai. When suddenly asked to vacate by her landlord, the protagonist Sudha (Archana), a middle-income employee, goes in search of a rented house, very much like Ilango and Amudha in *To Let*, but then she opts for personal space and tries to build her own house in a plot belonging to her grandfather. Later, however, to her dismay, she finds that the plot on which she has been constructing her house had already been acquired by the Metro Water Board. The film ends with Sudha's contemplation regarding seeking justice in court. *Veedu*, thus, foregrounds how the State, instead of providing a house, is driving Sudha to desperation with the threatening prospect of seizing the house she had built against heavy odds. See for details, BFS, "BFS (Balu Mahendra Film Society) Inauguration by Chezhiyan and *Veedu* Screening - Part 2," *YouTube.com*, 13 Feb. 2018, Accessed 3 March 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SypaYH2mUU>. Chezhiyan talks about how Balu Mahendra used to effectively weave small events into a narrative, particularly in the context of his film *Veedu*. Chezhiyan also draws attention to the significance of the subtext in Balu Mahendra's authorship: "the water tank (of the Metro Water Board) is there in the backdrop, but we only notice its significance later."

8. Nakkheeran Studio, To Let Director Chezhiyan Interview, "Periya Nadigarkala Vachu Nallpadam edukkave Mudiyaathu/ You Cannot Make Good Films with Big Actors [Stars]." *YouTube.com*, 18 Feb. 2019, Accessed. 24 Feb. 2019.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r7rJJyd3ToI> . [return to page 2]
9. See for details, Teshome Gabriel, *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation*, Ann Arbor, Michigan: Univ. of Michigan Research Press, 1982.
10. Ki. Rajanarayanan, *Kidai Kurunavalum Pannirandu Sirukathaikalum/Kidai Novella and Twelve Short Stories* (Sivaganga: Annam Publications, 1983).
11. Malathi Rangarajan, "Oruththi – A Taste of 'Other' Cinema," *Thehindu.com*, 1 Dec. 2004, Accessed 16 Aug. 2018. See, <https://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/fr/2004/10/01/stories/2004100102140300.htm>
12. Ibid.
13. My interview with Amshan Kumar, in Dec. 2018, at his residence in Chennai. Also, see the director's note on Manusangada in Mumbai Film Festival Brochure: See, Festival Programme 2017, "Cry Humanity [Manusangada]," *MumbaiFilmFestival.com*, See, <https://www.mumbaiFilmFestival.com/programmeDetail/242> . [return to page 3]
14. Festival Programme 2017, Ibid.
15. However, the Tamil Dalit literary movement predates Dalit cinema, spearheaded by the unique film director and Dalit activist Pa. Ranjith, by decades. In 1907, Ayothidas Pandithar aka C. Iyodhee Thass Pandithar, the legendary Dalit activist, writer, and philosopher started the Tamil weekly magazine *Oru Paisa Tamilan* (One Paisa Tamilan). Writers like Pooamani, So. Dharman, Bama, P. Sivakami, Sukhiratharani, Raj. Gowthaman, Azhagiya Periyavan, K.S. Gunasekaran, Ravikumar, Kanmani Gunasekaran, Imayam, among others, are some of the key figures in the domain of Tamil Dalit writing.
16. For details on frontality, see, Ravi S. Vasudevan, "Addressing the Spectator of a 'Third World' National Cinema: The Bombay 'Social' Film of the 1940s and 1950s," *Screen*, Volume 36, Issue 4, 1 December 1995, pp 312-17.
17. My Interview with Amshan, Ibid.
18. See for details, André Bazin, *Andre Bazin and Italian Neorealism*, ed. Bert Cardullo (New York and London: Continuum, 2011).
19. See for details on Mandamus: "Mandamus," *Law.cornell.edu*, Accessed 16 Aug. 2018, See, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/mandamus>
20. See for details, Mahi Pal, "Caste and Patriarchy in Panchayats," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 39, No. 32 (Aug. 7-13, 2004), pp. 3581.  
[return to page 4]
21. See for details, Anand Teltumbde, "Damning the Dalits for the Bania-Brahmin Crimes in Gujarat," *Ambedkar.org*, Web, 2 Aug. 2002, Accessed, 23 Jan. 2019, <http://www.ambedkar.org/vivek/DamningtheDalits.pdf>
22. The poet Inquilab (Prof. K.S. Shahul Hameed) "penned his famous poem 'manusangada naanga manusangada' when 43 Dalits were burnt alive in Keezhvenmani." See, "'Makkal Kavignar' [People's Poet] Inquilab passes away," *Newindianexpress.com*, 1 Dec. 2016, Accessed 16 Aug. 2018. See, [newindianexpress.com/cities/chennai/2016/dec/01/makkal-kavignar-inquilab-passes-away-1544651.html](http://newindianexpress.com/cities/chennai/2016/dec/01/makkal-kavignar-inquilab-passes-away-1544651.html)
23. Hugo Gorringe, "Drumming Out Oppression, Or Drumming It In? Identity,

Culture and Contention in Dalit Politics,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol. 50, No. 1, pp. 1-26.

24. Veyil, “Santhippu: Chezhiyan/Interview: Chezhiyan,” *Vikatan Thadam*, June 2018, p. 66. My interview with Ra. Chezhiyan, in Jan. 2018, at Chennai.

25. John David Rhodes and Elina Gorfinkel, eds. “Introduction,” *Taking Place: Location and the Moving Image* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. xv. [[return to page 6](#)]

26. See for the details about non-places, Marc Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 2008).

27. John David Rhodes and Elina Gorfinkel, eds. “Introduction,” *Ibid.*, p. xxi.

28. In Tamilnadu, Dravidian politics and popular cinema are inextricably intertwined. For instance, from 1967 onward till 2016, almost for the five decades all the chief ministers have been either scriptwriters or popular stars of Tamil cinema. See for details, Karthikeyan Damodaran, “In Tamil Nadu, Can There be Politics Without Cinema?,” *Thewire.in*, 8 Dec. 2016, Accessed 16 Aug. 2018, See <https://thewire.in/politics/tamil-nadu-politics-cinema> [[return to page 7](#)]

29. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London: Routledge, 2000 (first published 1966).

30. Mark Cousins, “The Ugly (Part 1),” *AA Files*, 28, (1994), 63.

31. Quoted in Ben Campkin, “Placing ‘Matter Out of Place’: *Purity and Danger* as Evidence for Architecture and Urbanism,” *Architectural Theory Review*, 18:1, 46-61. See <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13264826.2013.785579?needAccess=true> . [[return to page 8](#)]

32. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

33. See for details, Ben Campkin, *ibid*: See note 59 for details regarding how “a number of spatially-oriented disciplines such as cultural studies, geography, architectural and art history, scholars have used Kristeva's theory to examine spaces of abjection, marginalised communities, and the spatiality of hygiene.”

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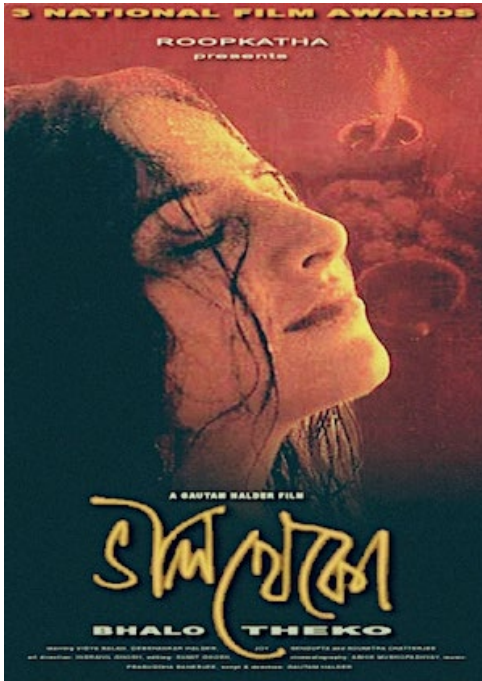
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### Fracturing nostalgia: the subversive dissonance of Vidya Balan's star-text

by [Tanushree Ghosh](#)



Balan's role in the Bengali film, *Bhalo Theko* (*Take Care*, 2003) received critical appreciation.

Reviewers of Vidya Balan's first Hindi film, *Parineeta* (2005), delighted in the film's recreation of 1960s Calcutta; they reveled in the film's period charm as well as its thoughtful adaptation of Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's 1914 novel (Jha: 2005; Raheja: 2016). Despite the new film star's earlier appearances in a TV comedy series, like *Hum Paanch*, as well as some advertisements and music videos, notably those by the 90s pop band, Euphoria, Vidya Balan at once gained recognition as a relative ingénue in the Mumbai film industry and as an actor—the *tam-bram*[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] girl from Chembur, Mumbai—who brought a certain middle-class femininity to the big screen.

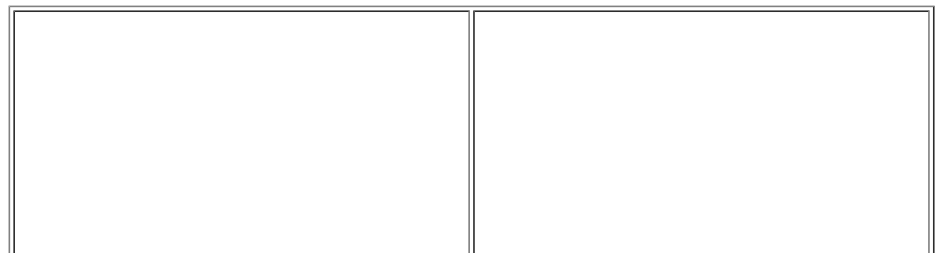


Balan as the nerdy Radhika in *Hum Paanch* (*The Five of Us*) 1995 popular comedy show on Zee network.



Balan in a *Euphoria* music video, "Kabhi Aana Tu Meri Gali" ("Come by my street someday," 2003).

With her filmic debut in *Parineeta*, where she plays Lolita, a charming orphan living with her cash-strapped uncle, Balan received praise as an actress whose "old world charm" was intertwined with the film's nostalgic temper as well with cinematic nostalgia in general (Ojha 2016). After *Parineeta*, Balan routinely played roles that evoked the chaste and passive heroine of the 1950s-80s Hindi films, the contra-vamp; this was before the boundaries between the self-effacing heroine and the spectacularly hyper-sexualized vamp significantly blurred in the 1990s. In contrast, later media debacles surrounded Balan's poor film choices, fashion failures, and body-type issues, and these further served, albeit adversely, to constitute her as a heroine who was a little 'too Indian.'








From 2006 to 2008, Balan starred in a series of mediocre films which consistently cast her as the stereotypical love interest. In this image, we see Balan as Janhavi, a radio show host in *Lage Raho Munnabhai* (Keep at it, *Munnabhai*, 2006).



Balan as Isha Sahni in *Heyy Babyy* (2007).



Balan as Priya in *Kismet Konnection* (2008).



Balan as Tehzeeb Hussain in *Salaam-e-Ishq: A Tribute to Love* (2007).



Balan as Rajjo in *Eklavya: The Royal Guard* (2007).

With successes, such as *Bhul Bhulaiya* (2007), *Paa* (2009), *Ishqiya* (2010), *No-one Killed Jessica* (2011), *Dirty Picture* (2011), and *Kahaani* (2012), which garnered both critical and popular praise, Balan's star-text became even more complex. On the one hand, Balan was termed Bollywood's "fourth Khan," suggesting both her ability to carry a film on her shoulders as well as her massive star power that drew audiences to film-theaters (*India Today* 2012). She was hailed as the "leading lady with balls" (Banan 2012), as "Vidya Balan, the hero" (Jhamkhandikar 2011): metaphorically then, Balan did not fit into the mold of the typical "love-interest" in Hindi cinema; she became masculine or trans-woman.



Balan's role as Sabrina Lal, the bereaved sister trying to find justice for her murdered sibling, was much appreciated.



Nargis in traditional sari with Raj Kapoor on the cover of *Filmfare* magazine (1954).

On the other hand, she became the bearer of “Indian” femininity countering western influence, a woman of substance who made the *saree* seem sexy again (Gupta 2010).

In this essay, I examine how Balan's star-text comes to be increasingly shaped by a multitude of cultural discourses expressing nostalgia for the 'Indian' womanhood of the past. This happened precisely because of the various, often incongruent discursive formations of nostalgia around and about her. For this reason, Balan's star-text becomes a productive site that allows a critical examination of the interpenetrations of nostalgia and femininity in Hindi cinema and associated media discourses. In these intersections of Balan's stardom with cinematic (diegetic and extra-diegetic) nostalgia for the pre-1990s heroine, her star-text generates critical dissonance. That is, it evokes cultural and cinematic nostalgia for 'Indian' femininity of the past, but it also subversively fractures nostalgia, sometimes in the same film, making room for revisionist gender politics. Through its dissonance, Balan's star-text makes viewers more aware of the historical trajectories and the constructed nature of and gaps between star, actor, and filmic femininities. In this essay, I engage with key films from Balan's career as well as her media persona (interviews, film reviews, articles, and magazine covers) to explore how her star-text utilizes cultural nostalgia for traditional femininity while increasingly making room for more radical subjectivities. However, within these overlaid contradictions, the syntax of Balan's understated rebellion eschews western, liberal modernities. Instead, the non-normative aspect of her star-text is mostly drawn from counter-cultures present within the Indian ethos.

## The polyphony of Balan's nostalgic 'Indianness'

In many discussions of the past, or rather how past is imagined, referring to *nostalgia* becomes a dominant modality. And, even though that concept appears ubiquitously, appearing everywhere from the popular lexicon to scholarly expositions on culture, nostalgia is not an easy idea to pin down.[2] There were pathological associations to the term that changed over time to emphasize nostalgia as an affective state of longing for the past. The 'cure' or the promise of the 'home' now gave way to the understanding that the longed-for past was essentially irrecoverable, that the desire or ache of nostalgia was for time elapsed that could not be recovered. As Linda Hutcheon notes,

“The aesthetics of nostalgia might, therefore, be less a matter of simple memory than of complex projection; the invocation of a partial, idealized history merges with a dissatisfaction with the present” (Hutcheon and Valdes 2010).

The tendency in nostalgic thought to simplify the past or to obscure certain undesirable, complex elements of it that do not fit an idealized version of the past fuels nostalgia's reactionary and/or conservative temper (Stewart 2007; Jameson 1993; Grainge 2002; Hutcheon and Valdes 2010).[3] Recent scholarship, however, has sought to recuperate nostalgia from the conservative turn by locating potential critique in nostalgia's dissatisfaction with the present (Pickering and Keightley 2006). Specifically, film and media studies have offered several important interventions by theorizing nostalgia as something more productive than a vacuous imitation or parody of the past. The “return of the image”—to use Vera Dika's phrase—also offers the possibility that spectators might acknowledge the textualized nature of representation (Dika 2003; Dwyer 2015; Sprengler 2011; Silverman 1994). Scholars also point to how the affective power of nostalgia, its emotionally charged nature, becomes the reason for its perceived 'low-brow,' populist, uncritical character (Thomas Kulka 2002; Amelia DeFalco 2004).[4]

In this vein, I wish to explore here how the nostalgic resonance of Balan's star-text





Idealized Indian femininity on film magazine covers: Nargis in a maternal pose with her dolls on the cover of *Filmfare* magazine (1956).



Meena Kumari as the traditional Hindu wife decorating a *Rangoli* on the cover of *Filmfare* magazine (1953).

moves between different registers and enables a multitude of ideologically distinct and varied spectatorial positions, potentially including ways for active spectatorships. However, before I unpack that assertion, I would also like to address the intersections between stardom and nostalgia as apparent in Balan's star-text.

Richard Dyer's foundational work identifies star image as

"[...] a complex configuration of visual, verbal and aural signs. This configuration may constitute the general image of stardom or of a particular star. It is manifest not only in films but in all kinds of media text" (1998, 34).

As a mediated, textual, semiotic construct, the star-image has a significance that is not intrinsic to the individual actor but pertains to larger cultural concerns. According to Dyer,

"Stars represent typical ways of behaving, feeling and thinking in contemporary society, ways that have been socially, culturally, historically constructed" (2011: 17).[5]

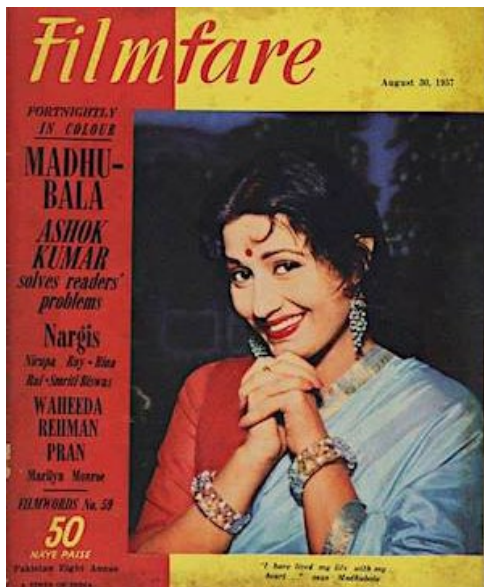
Within Indian film studies, Neepa Majumdar has notably complicated Dyer's model of a public/private dichotomy in the star persona (2009).[6] Majumdar notes that in the 1930s and 40s, stardom did not take recourse to the duality of a public profile and a private life of gossip and scandal. In fact, as the Hindi film industry tried to define its identity against international cinema, especially Hollywood, and combat the disrepute of cinema within Indian society, publicists placed an emphasis on the stars' personal profile of education, cultural refinement, and moral rectitude, especially for the female actors. In their reading of *Filmindia* in the 1940s, C. Yamini Krishna & Emilia Teles Da Silva also point to how this major film magazine propagated normative gender roles for film fans and the film industry alike (2015, 183-198).

However, as Rosie Thomas' work has shown through a reading of Nargis' star image, stardom in the Bombay film industry even as early as the 1950s could also display a dialogue between the star's filmic and private identities:

"These stories [gossip] are consumed almost as avidly as the films themselves, and in recent years, many publications have been regularly produced devoted exclusively to such narratives, which become tacitly —and at times, even quite overtly—interwoven in the Indian audience's readings of the films" (1995, 22).

Indeed, one may posit that with the emergence of film and video magazines, such as *Filmfare*, *Stardust*, *Cineblitz*, *Filmiduniya*, and *Lehren* in the 1970s and 80s, which covered celebrity life, gossip, and other events, stardom in Hindi-language





Madhubala plays the problem-solving Agony Aunt in this issue of *Filmfare* magazine (1957).



Nadira as the westernized vamp, Maya in *Shree 420* (Mr. 420, 1955).



Helen as a Monica, a cabaret dancer in *Caravan* (1971).

cinema does display an increasing congruence with Dyer's model for Hollywood stardom.[7]

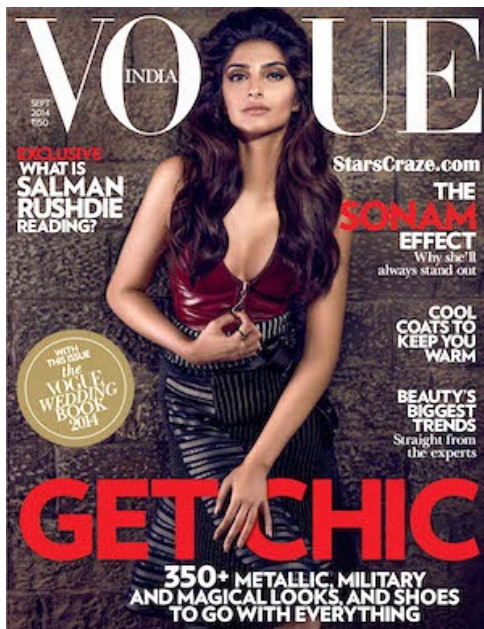
When it comes to star-texts of female actors, Indian film scholars generally agree that an essentially different cultural paradigm fuels stardom in Hindi cinema as compared to Hollywood. While Majumdar has noted how the 1930s "Indian cinema found its model for liberatory, modern (female) identities in nationalist discourses," scholars working on more contemporary, post-liberalization-era cinema still note cultural configurations of femininity that maintain gendered social spheres and roles.[8] As one of the most influential forms of mass culture, Hindi cinema has also continued to conflate ideal femininity with "Indian-ness" and "tradition" (Thomas 1995; Viridi 2003). With the influx of foreign money and international cultural influences, the increased visibility and appeal of the Hindu right, as well as the growing influence of the Indian diaspora in post-1990s liberalized India, cultural discourses consolidated traditional gender roles, sometimes to reactionary proportions. While Ashish Rajadhyaksha (2008) has noted the "Bollywoodization" of popular Bombay cinema as the Hindi film industry capitalized on the nostalgia for traditional roots, Jyothika Viridi (2003), Leela Fernandes (2001), and Jenny Sharpe (2005) among others have commented on how the Hindi film heroine became a site of identity politics that took specific shape in post-liberal India. As Fernandes observes,

"The potential disruption [of globalization and cultural hybridity] is managed through a remapping of the nation's boundaries through a politics of gender which center around conflicts over the preservation of the purity of women's sexuality, a process which once again conflates the preservation of nationness with the protection of women" (2001, 157).

Within the ideologically-charged context of post-liberal India, where identity, especially femininities, carry the burden of balancing tradition and modernity, Balan's star-text becomes a critical instance of how nostalgia for the past and stardom can have a mutually constitutive relation. Moreover, one may argue that the tensions between nostalgia and the present, between traditional and transgressive femininities become the defining feature of Balan's star-text and fuel her stardom.[9]

On the one hand, nostalgic formations of femininity, such as the ones shaping Balan's star-text, are rooted in renascent nationalism that appropriates the past, even the cinematic past, as a mythical and simplified commodity. At worst, these discourses can be reactionary and conservative, conjuring up an ideological past that erases the contradictions and historicity of femininity as cultural construction. The nostalgia for 1950s and 60s heroines also attempts to recuperate an idealized femininity, founded on notions of modesty and sexual chastity; in film, 'purity' was underscored by the presence of the hypersexualized and morally questionable vamp figure.

On the other hand, those very nostalgic underpinnings of Balan's "Indian" femininity positioned her as a misfit in a film-industry that wanted to cater both to the Indian diaspora as well as to the global sensibilities of audiences at home. With several beauty pageant winners-turning towards Bollywood for film careers in the 1990s, most notably Aishwarya Rai, Sushmita Sen, and Priyanka Chopra, femininity, especially in terms of body type and fashion, was defined according to norms driven by western, specifically white femininity. One might even say that the discursive continuum, which constituted international beauty pageants as sites where India showcased its presence and influence in the global scheme of



The changing face of the Hindi film heroine as visible on fashion magazine covers: Sonam Kapoor on the cover of *Vogue India* (2014).



Alia Bhatt on the cover of *Elle* (2015).

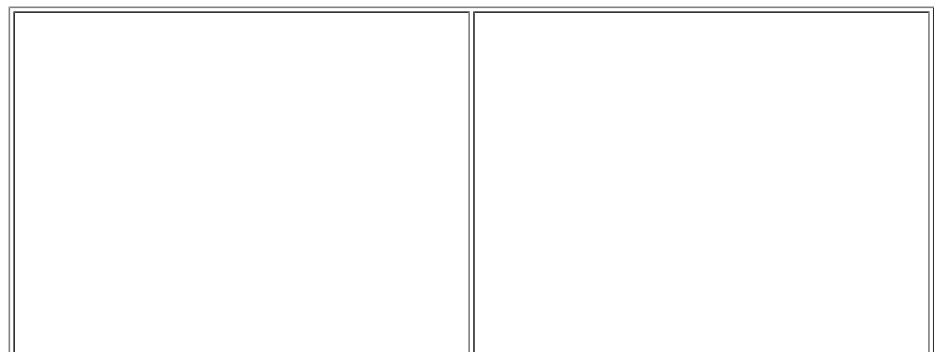
things in the 1990s, continues in the cultural work of contemporary lifestyle and fashion magazines like *Vogue India* and *Elle* that routinely feature fashion-forward, physically petite actors like Sonam Kapoor and Alia Bhatt on their covers. Media sources constituted Balan as a heroine who was not quite contemporary, who did not fit into the mold of the glamorous, size-zero stars, such as Kareena and Deepika.

For example, to indicate a highly visible example of the harsh critique directed at Balan for her fashion sense, at the 2008 Filmfare awards the hosts, Shahrukh and Saif Khan, gave a visibly uncomfortable Balan the *Na-real* (not real) award, a mock trophy, for being the worst-dressed actress of 2007, mostly based on her wardrobe in *Hey Baby*. This moment—in itself, a significant confirmation of the Hindi film industry's patriarchal and clannish—also marked Balan as the vulnerable outsider who could be openly mocked and ridiculed for her wardrobe decisions. In the media furor that followed, the costume designer for film, Manish Malhotra, not only called the star's fashion sense outdated but also placed the blame on Balan's body-type, which did not conform to Hindi film industry's standards of feminine beauty: "How can she speak about fashion sense with her fantastic figure? Who is she?" (Upadhyay 2017) Media coverage of the Filmfare event and of the celebrity squabbles that followed were also heavily biased against Balan.

Three years later even, in 2010, the MSN Fashion section featured a snarky attack on Vidya, which was representative of the persistent industry and media narrative about her overly traditional, non-western 'look':

"Vidya, you exhaust us. The second we see your name in our inbox, we go running for a tall glass of Bournvita just to prepare ourselves for whatever you might be planning to attack us with" (Chaudhary 2012).

Yet, following the commercial and critical success, such as *Dirty Picture* and *Kahaani*, the configuration of 'Indianness' around Balan becomes much more laudatory, with critics seeing her as a successor to the Hindi film heroines of the 1950s and 60s. In more than thirty magazine covers featuring Vidya, such as in *Filmfare*, *Cineblitz*, *FHM*, *Stardust*, and *Femina*, Vidya's attire and style is overwhelmingly traditional. In fact, 2013 covers for *Filmfare India* and *Filmfare Middle East* present Balan in a throwback, retro mode. In the former, Balan appears on the cover with hairstyle, make-up, and *saree* reminiscent of the 1960s heroines, like Asha Parekh and Sharmila Tagore, while in the latter, the cover photograph recreates the look of heroines such as Meena Kumari and Madhubala, complete with the sepia tones of the photograph. In its 2013 collector's edition, which was put together as a homage to actors of the yesteryears, *Cineblitz* featured Balan on the cover recreating Nargis' iconic scene with the plough in *Mother India*. Balan inhabits star personas of the past, thus establishing a continuum between the expression of complex femininity on-screen and the stardom of actors, such as Meena Kumari, Madhubala, and Nargis, with her own star-text.







Balan projects traditional Indian identity on magazine covers: Balan on a *Filmfare* Magazine Cover, March 2010.



Balan on *FHM* Magazine Cover, November 2010, which was touted as 'making the saree sexy again.'

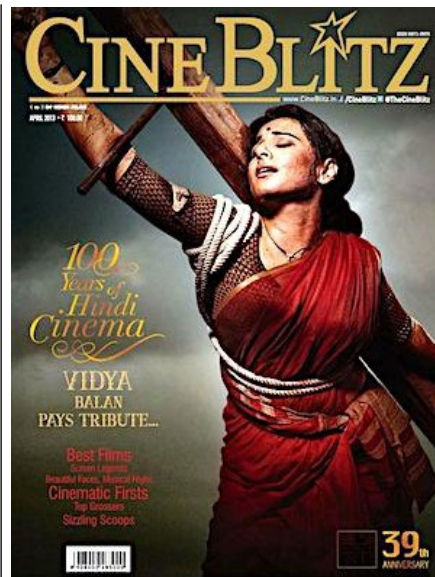


Balan's look is reminiscent of 1950s heroines in this *Filmfare* Hindi Magazine Cover, February 2013.



Black and white photo of Balan from the same photoshoot for the January 2013 cover of *Filmfare* Middle East magazine.





Balan recreates the iconic pose from *Mother India* for the April 2013 cover of *Cineblitz* magazine.



Balan channels the 1960s and 70s heroines, such as Sharmila Tagore and Asha Parekh, for the July 2013 cover of *Filmfare* magazine.



Balan in traditional attire being addressed as "Wonder Woman" on a *Filmfare* Magazine Cover, November 2017.



Balan wears a saree at the 2013 Cannes while several of her peers choose the more western option of evening gowns.

Moreover, as critics compared Balan's cinematic performances to powerhouse actresses of the past, like Waheeda Rahman and Shabana Azmi, their language demonstrates nostalgia functioning in empowering ways. For example, in an interview, Waheeda Rahman identified Balan as an actress who could—in Rahman's own words—"be the next Waheeda Rahman," highlighting by that comparison Balan's acting prowess (*Indian Express* 2015). Along similar lines, Balan becomes the "classical actress," her "brand of acting" reminiscent of actresses known for their author-backed complex roles and compelling cinematic presence and performance, such as "Shabana Azmi, Smita Patil, and Nandita

Das.” As critics place Balan in that venerable lineage, they find her superior to “glam gals,” who function mostly as eye candy in popular hero-oriented films (*Telegraph* 2006; *Times of India* 2010; *Facetime* 2016). This nostalgic evocation of cinema thespians creates a historical trajectory within Balan’s own body of work, her performance, and breaks the vacuum that enables the perception of the female actress as commodity in Hindi cinema.

In recent years, Balan has embraced this identity, which sets her apart from the more physically normative and fashion-forward contemporary female actors, and interestingly she uses a narrative of self-discovery to explain her difference. In an interview with Anupama Chopra, Balan laughs at her unsuccessful attempts to fit into the mold of the contemporary glamorous actress. However, in that self-ironizing moment, it is also apparent that she chooses to see herself as a ‘serious’ actress who expects challenging roles; she observes that she “sleepwalks through the movies” where she is cast as the passive love-interest (Chopra 2016).

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Remakes, nostalgia, and Balan's early-career films



The opening shot of Howrah bridge situates *Parineeta* (2005) in 1960s Kolkata.



A shot of a coffeehouse in the opening sequence of *Parineeta*.



*Parineeta* recreates a scene from *Charulata* (1964).



Lolita turns to face the camera; her direct gaze adds agency and authority to her character.

In her early-career films, Balan's evolving star-text shows many overlaps with nostalgic cinematic configurations of the past, especially seen in remakes. The memory of famous novels, popular films, as well as literary and cinematic heroines becomes a part of the cinephile spectators' pleasures vis-à-vis Balan's performances. This was one of the main appeals of Vidhu Vinod Chopra's *Parineeta*. The film presented Indian audiences with the loving recreation of 1960s Calcutta with its focus on the narrow lanes of North Kolkata, stock heritage shots of the trams, Howrah bridge, and the Victoria Memorial. Subarna Ray Choudhury's period-specific costume design highlighted western fashion of the sixties, like the flared trousers and printed shirts, as well as gorgeously opulent Indian clothing and jewelry. The film also used Burdwan House, Alipore, the grand emblem of Bengali *zamindari* and the 'toytrain' of Darjeeling Himalayan Railways, which famously featured in the hit song "Mere Sapno Ki Rani" (the queen of my dreams) from *Aradhana* as filming locations.

More importantly, Chopra's film uses intertextuality strategically to bolster its identity as 'prestige' cinema. The film, for instance, showcased its identity not only as a literary adaptation of Chatterjee's novel, but also as the film adaptation that remade previous film adaptations, namely Bimal Roy's 1953 and Ajoy Kar's 1969 versions. Chopra's *Parineeta* also pays homage to Satyajit Ray's *Charulata*, especially through its swing scene and the use of Rabindranath Tagore's song "Phool Phool Dhole Dhole," which *Charulata* hums as she enjoys her brother in law's company and unbeknownst to herself falls in love with him. Ironically, however, Chopra's film also enabled an almost fetishistic consumption of "Bengali" culture popularized by Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Devdas*, which was based on another novel by Chatterjee. *Parineeta*'s gestures towards both highbrow arthouse as well as popular Hindi cinemas do work in tandem, however, to produce nostalgia for the literary, cinematic, and cultural past.

Balan as Lolita carries the weight of nostalgia in the film. One of the reasons why Balan came to occupy such pivotal role in the film's nostalgic evocation of the past could be that the other major actors in the film, like Saif Khan, Sanjay Dutt, and even Raima Sen, were already known film personalities with established film careers. At that point, Balan was somewhat known for her work on television, but her film presence was fledgling, having appeared only in a Bengali film *Bhalo Theko* (2003).

More significantly, however, *Parineeta*'s narrative sets her up as the bearer of traditions. The film opens with almost sepia toned shots of the Kolkata cityscape peopled with individuals going about their daily routines: on the banks of river Ganga, we find a priest praying and wrestlers performing their morning exercise. The soundtrack is Tagore's "Amar Shonar Bangla," an ode to the beauty of the Bengali heartland. The montage that follows uses the voice of the veteran actor, Amitabh Bachchan, to present viewers with a nostalgic assemblage of objects and affects associated in the popular imagination with Bengali culture: 1962 Calcutta becomes at once a city of rickshaws and trams, of coffeehouses, of the desire for social change, and of religious faith (Kalibari), sweet rasgullas and spicy *phuchkas*, of football, the bustle of Boubazar, *adda*, political unrest, and love.

Balan's introduction follows soon after in an emotionally-charged sequence. It is the night of Shekhar's wedding and he comes to visit Lolita's ailing aunt. We begin with a close-up of Lolita's eyes looking at Shekhar, the filmic narrative according





Lolita, supposedly married to another man, attempts to seduce Shekhar.



Lolita persists in furthering their physical intimacy despite Shekhar's rejections.



One of the climactic scenes in the film where Shekhar and Lolita confess their love for each other.



Shekhar and Lolita consummate their secret marriage.



her with subjectivity and agency that no other character had been given thus far. Viewers are shown another close-up of Lolita applying *sindoor* on her forehead and then looking in the mirror with satisfaction; she seems to have a concrete and powerful sense of self. (In contrast, before coming over to Lolita's house, Shekhar had looked at himself in the mirror in an abstracted and discontented manner.) Lolita turns around to face the camera, resplendent in almost bridal finery, and with conch shells clinking in the background evoking aural associations of both wedding rituals as well as puja ceremonies. Lolita's formidable presence here derives from the symbolism of *suhaag* and her identity as a married woman.

However, the nostalgia evoked by her traditional appearance is destabilized through her seemingly non-normative sexuality. As the narrative begins with Shekhar's imminent wedding, film viewers, much like Shekhar, assume that Lolita is married to someone else. Lolita's rather intimate conversation with Shekhar, where she overtly expresses sexual desire and longing for him, then breaks the normative disciplining of female desire, usually placed within the bounds of marriage or at least the marriage plot. Balan's performance, especially her body language and facial expressions add to Lolita's transgressive behavior: Lolita moves very close to Shekhar, touching him several times even as he flinches and moves away; her gaze is very direct and she has a seductive smile on her face.

In a substantial deviation from the original novel as well as previous film adaptations, Chopra's film, in flashback, shows Lolita and Shekhar consummating their relationship after garlanding each other during an auspicious *muhurat*. Like Lolita's introduction, this act of pre-marital sex following their *gandharva* marriage (a Vedic marriage based on mutual attraction that does not require rituals, witnesses, or parental consent) is also not easily catalogued under either transgressive, vampish or normative, *sanskari* femininity. Even as the film reviewers praised Vidya Balan's traditional look that completed the period charm of the film, the subversive aspects of Lolita's characterization serve to problematize the easy equation of Balan and conventional femininity.[10] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

While Balan acted in a chain of mediocre films from 2006 to 2008, her role as Avni in *Bhool Bhulaiya* (2007) stands out as an exception.[11] A remake of the commercially and critically successful Malayalam film, *Manichitrathazhu* (*The Ornate Lock*, 1993), which had also been remade in Tamil as *Chandramukhi* (2005) as well as Kannada as *Aapthamitra* (2004), *Bhool Bhulaiya*, much like *Parineeta*, mobilized cinematic memory and nostalgia that was dependent on a collaboration between Malayalam, Tamil, and Hindi film industries, and viewers' familiarity with the previous versions.[12] Balan's performance as Avni in the film becomes a palimpsest of Shobana and Jyothika's rendition of the character of the newly-married woman who becomes obsessed/possessed with the tragic love-story of a court dancer entrapped by a besotted king. Online discussion among fans of the films inevitably lead to comparisons between the various versions and the relative merits of each remake.

Along with the remake functioning as cinematic quotation, however, the story also expresses a deep nostalgia for a past; specifically, in keeping with a prominent trope in the Indian horror film genre, the past of feudal aristocracy. In a reading of *Manichitrathazu*, Mithuraaj Dhusiya observes that "the locked door separates an ordinary Malayali household from its feudal past wherein concubinage and the subjugation of alien women was a mundane fact of existence" (2018, 174). Dhusiya's remark holds true for *Bhool Bhulaiya* as well although the film cobbles together various Northern Indian cultural traditions, identities, and landscapes to create a similar sense of a bygone feudal past.[13] In the opening scene, a character walks around a *haveli*, which is being restored after sitting unoccupied for decades, noting wistfully, "The reign is gone, and the kings are gone. Now, even the lining of the quilt is beginning to tear." The film then begins with lament for the royal past, which is also seamlessly tied to aristocratic masculinity and honor.

Shot of the haunted *haveli* (feudal house/palace) in *Bhool Bhulaiya* (2007).



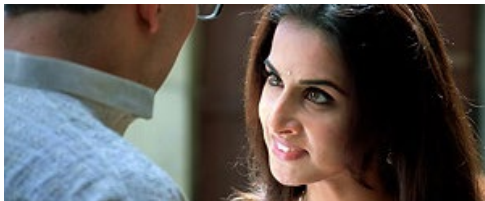
Shots of Varanasi *ghaats* root the story of *Bhool Bhulaiya* in a traditional Hindu space.



Avni (on the left) with Siddhartha meeting the latter's extended family.



Avni's use of the video camera foregrounds her outsider, almost tourist-like, position.



Avni begins to act uncharacteristically.

The post-1990s Hindi horror, in contrast to the gothic horror film of the 1950s and 60s, or the Ramsay brothers B-circuit horror of the 1970s and 80s, responded in reactionary ways to liberalization and its concomitant changes in Indian society. Meheli Sen has argued that contemporary horror films systematically enact an attack on the “discourses of modernity,” that found new subjectivities, especially those that open up non-traditional gender roles (2017, 201-206). At first glance, *Bhool Bhulaiya* seems to enact a similar conflict between tradition and modernity, between feudal, Hindu *savarna* patriarchy and rebellious femininities, which produces a disciplinary narrative focused on the female protagonist, Avni. Balan as Avni is cast as a foreigner, a woman who arrives from the United States with Siddhartha to the disappointment of his extended family who were hoping for a wedding between him and Radha (his uncle's adopted daughter). From the point of introduction, Avni's very presence is rendered transgressive: she becomes the reminder that Siddhartha had disregarded the wishes of his father and uncle, who had intended Radha as a match for him. The contrast between Avni and Radha is accentuated by the former appearing in jeans and blazer while the latter dons a *saree*.

Not heeding to any of the warnings about the haunted *haveli*, Avni not only decides to live there but also to explore the part of the royal home that has been locked after supernatural hauntings. There is a clear tension between Avni and Siddhartha's skepticism about the local ghost stories and the strident belief of the village inhabitants, who steer clear of the haunted ancestral home. When supernatural events begin to disturb the peace of the household, the irate uncle places the blame squarely on Avni: “the modern wife.”

Yet, *Bhool Bhulaiya* redraws the gender politics of the Indian horror genre through Balan's character, especially by rendering it the site of critique and protest against masculine privilege and the institution of marriage. It draws viewers' attention to the relationship between husband and wife where the latter finds herself isolated in an alien place, surrounded by an extended family she does not know, and deprived of the attentions of a husband consumed by work. The legend of the talented dancer, Manjulika, deprived of love, and trapped in this palace begins to resonate with Avni's marriage and her place within the household, thus placing pressure on idealized domestic femininity. The feminine, especially through the character of Manjulika becomes a monstrous force in need of containment; in Barbara Creed's terms, she is an “abject subject” who is “represented within patriarchal discourses as an implacable enemy of the symbolic order” (76).[14] However, through twin narratives—a story of a wronged woman looking to avenge the death of her beloved and the mythology of goddess Durga killing the demon, Mahishasura—the film critiques men's violent control over and appropriation of female bodies and identities.



Avni becomes Manjulika and expresses rage against her imprisonment when Siddhartha refuses to let her go to the market.



Avni as Manjulika threatens her husband with violence.





Siddharth's exclamation of surprise snaps Avni out of Manjulika's angry persona; the difference is stark: rage and strength give way to helplessness and a teary-eyed bewilderment.



The climactic scene in the film where Avni has completely transformed into Manjulika and wants to kill king/Siddhartha.

While the conclusion presents us with a 'cured,' listless protagonist, who states her name as "Avni Siddharth Chaturvedi," emphasizing her identity as a married woman, this moment comes only after the validation of female anger and protest, and after the act of revenge has been completed. Interestingly, even Avni's extramarital desire for Sharad and discontent with her current marriage, which could be erased by the typical ghost story trope of possession, remain as elements of her core personality, tied to childhood trauma and the psychological diagnosis of dissociative identity disorder. The filmic narrative, especially Balan's character, walks a tightrope between a radical critique of patriarchy and a desire to restore order in the shape of conventional gender-based power hierarchy.

## Rebellious bodies

In *Paa* (2009)—the film that established Balan as a commercially viable actress with acting chops—Balan plays the part of Dr. Vidya, the unwed mother of a child with progeria, but she does not come across as a victim. She is working as a gynecologist and able to provide for herself and her child. Comprising of her mother, herself, and her son, Auro, Vidya's household challenges heteronormative notions of the nuclear family. The song "mudi mudi kahaan main" (where did chance lead me), which highlighted Vidya and Amol's (Abhishek Bachchan) romantic and passionate relationship is repeated with a montage of scenes from Vidya's pregnancy that emphasize Vidya's perseverance and the support and love of her mother; overall, the repetition offer a counter-narrative to romantic coupling and bourgeois notions of family. While casting a single, unwed mother as sympathetic subject was successfully handled in Hindi films like *Dhool Ka Phool* (1959) *Aradhana* (1969), *Shakti* (1982), *Kya Kehna* (2000), Balan as Dr. Vidya stands out since her character does not appear victimized by her motherhood. She is not a tragic figure, or a helpless woman in need of rescue. The film does capitulate to social conventions in ending with her marriage to Amol, but the move towards marriage is not driven by scripting the need to 'save' her.



Shots from the song *mudi mudi* in *Paa* (2009) that show a pregnant Dr. Vidya with her mother.



Despite a premarital pregnancy, the relationship between the mother and her pregnant daughter is not one of moral censure, but of love and support.



*Paa* ends with Dr. Vidya's marriage with Amol; the former remains single until she finally reunites with the father of her child.

While Balan's role in *Paa* put pressure on normative femininity and family structure, her role as Krishna in *Ishqiya* (2010) combined multiple arcs of identities that jostled together, and denaturalized stereotypical representations of




the femme fatale, the widow, the beloved, and the avenging woman by combining them in one figure. When Balan is first introduced in the film, she appears as the grieving widow. The song, “badi dheere jali,” (“the night burns slowly”) a semi-classical composition sets her up as a classic Indian heroine mourning the loss of her husband. Through her romance with Khalujaan, played by Naseeruddin Shah, the film indulges in nostalgia for romantic courtship as seen in 1950s and 60s Hindi cinema: exchanged glances and smiles, shy conversations, and couples walking together. The song “dil to baccha hai ji” (“my heart is a child”) with its use of accordion takes cinematic audience back to the era of Raj Kapoor, with music reviews praising its “vintage” sound (Mukherjee 2017; Vipin 2010).



Balan plays the role of Krishna, a widow mourning the passing of her husband, in *Ishqiya* (2010).



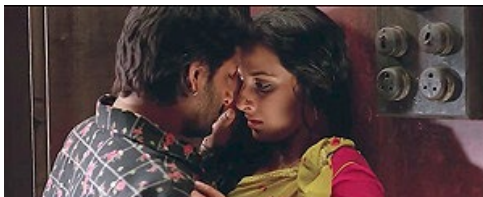
The semi-classical number, *badi dheere jali*, that Krishna sings after her morning prayers adds to her seemingly traditional persona.



The song *dil to baccha hai ji* uses vintage music with romantic interactions, such as riding a bicycle together, drawn from 1950s Hindi cinema.



Krishna and Khalujaan in *dil to baccha hai ji*.



Krishna's affair with Babban is more overtly sexual.

It is through her romance with Babban, played by Arshad Warsi, that Balan as Krishna pushes the envelope as to how sexual desire might be represented in Hindi cinema. Krishna's early interactions with Babban alternate between ridiculing him and tempting him with the promise of sexual pleasure, including the innuendo-drenched scene where she sucks Babban's thumb, which—as a coded depiction of oral sex—paints her as a sexually-knowing temptress. In post-production interviews, Balan distances herself from the character of Krishna,

“That gesture of sucking Arshad's thumb was so raunchy and sexy, and that's so not me, I couldn't connect with it at all” (Jha 2010).



The controversial gesture in the film that posits Krishna as a seductress.



Krishna and Babban's relationship is also shown in playful terms, thus complicating the overtly sexual representation.

However, she repeated this act on *Coffee with Karan* with Rani Mukherjee, no longer offering the usual rationale that the 'role demanded such a gesture,' and she followed it with raucous laughter that mocked the scandalized expression on Johar's face. This public appearance was then critically perceived as Balan becoming "too bold (*Bollywoodlife* 2011).

As the film progresses, viewers along with Khalu and Babban discover that Krishna—true to her name, which evokes the mythological deity known for his adept handling of the truth—is neither the helpless widow, nor romantically interested in either of them. Instead, she has concocted an elaborate plan in order to reach her husband, who had faked his death and started a new life without her, so she can take revenge for betrayal. Balan's character evokes the figure of the avenging woman from popular Hindi cinema, such as *Pratighaat* (1987), *Khoon Bhari Maang* (1988), or *Ek Hasina Thi* (2004). The film, however, by placing the revenge narrative within marriage to a husband whom she had loved, puts pressure on the representation of love and marriage in Hindi cinema—where loyal wives wait patiently and often in vain, as in *Mother India*, for their husbands to return. The childlessness of Krishna also makes a disguised reference to the social reality of childless women abandoned by their husbands, thereby adding another layer to the revenge motif.[15] The concluding scene shows Krishna walking between Khalu and Babban—a configuration that contests the heteronormative romantic coupling and/or the marriage plot expected in popular Hindi cinema. In fact, the script is quite radical in its refusal to pin down Krishna to just one relationship with just one man.



Krishna pretends to be in love with both Khalujaan and Babban to achieve her plan of revenge against her husband.



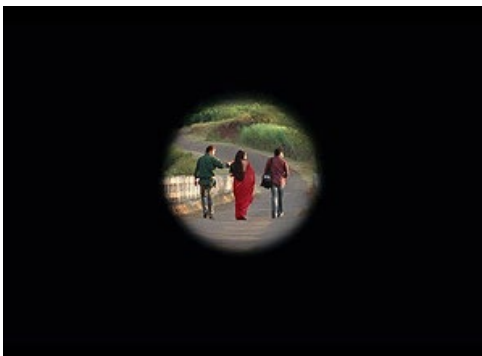
Krishna confronting her husband for attempting to kill her.



Krishna stands in the doorway looking at her dying husband, who has been burnt badly in a fire orchestrated by her.



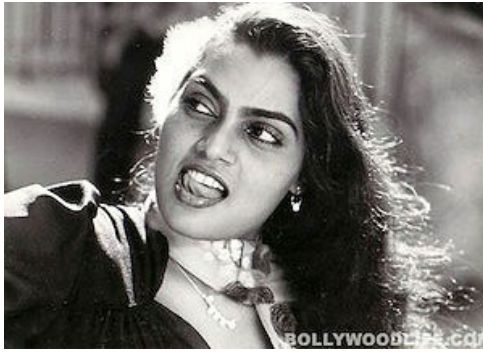
Khalujaan, Babban, and Krishna walk away from the burning house.



The concluding scene complicates heteronormative romantic coupling and defies the marriage plot.

Following the acclaim for her role of Sabrina, the aggrieved sister seeking justice for her sister's murder, in *No one Killed Jessica* (2011), Balan swung the representational pendulum in the opposite direction with *Dirty Picture* (2011), a putative biopic of the Silk Smitha, the sex symbol of South Indian films in the 1970s and 80s. Where Sabrina's more glamorous sister teasingly terms the former a boring "virgin," Reshma embraces the role of the cinematic sex-pot with relish. *Dirty Picture* builds on and adds to Balan's dissonant star-text to present the 1980s vamp as a masquerade, as a drag performance. She culls together bodily gestures, facial expressions, crude or suggestive dialogues, and revealing apparel to present the vamp's taboo sexuality as an act. Her presentation scoffs at the





Silk Smitha, or Vijaylakshmi Vadlapati, starred in over 450 films in Malayalam, Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, and Hindi.



Still from the song *tohfa* in *Himmatwala* (1983).



*Dirty Picture* (2011) recreates iconic sets from 1970s films, especially in its *ooh la la* song.



Surya Kant, the ageing superstar, romancing Silk in *ooh la la*.

binary divisions that marks certain configurations of female sexuality as undesirable or offensive in the first place.

The script also presents a paradigm shift of sorts by placing the figure of the vamp at the narrative center and asking audiences to view her as a sympathetic figure, to identify with Silk's struggles to break into the patriarchal and hyper-masculine film industry without any godfather or kinship networks. The film demonstrates its awareness of how the body of the woman, simultaneously desired and reviled, commodified and sold, easily functions as—to use Meenakshi Thapan's phrase—"body-for-others," which is socially constructed and always subject to the public, generally masculine, gaze (2009). In an impassioned award acceptance speech, Silk responds to a co-actor's snide remark, terming her everyone's "dirty secret," by critiquing the double standards of the film industry. Silk attacks the moral hypocrisy of the industry, which simultaneously profits off her body and banishes her into the farthest margins of the film community as an outcast. The film constantly establishes links between the voyeuristic looks of individual men, such as Reshma's lecherous neighbor or the man who propositions her in a cinema hall, and the exploitative gaze of the camera. In fact, even the imaginary look of love that Reshma projects on to the posters of her adored superstar is eventually falsified as the ageing hero turns out to be extremely exploitative of young female co-stars.

Beyond the storyline's critique of the normative and exploitative sex roles within the film industry and in society at large, however, it is *Dirty Picture*'s use of a camp aesthetic that introduces an ironic distance between spectators and the gender/sex roles represented in the film. In my reading of *Dirty Picture*, I depend on Pamela W. Robertson's theorization of "feminist camp," which—in her words—"has affinities with feminist discussions of gender construction, performance, and enactment" (1996, 6) Robertson employs both Judith Butler's concept of drag and Mary Anne Doane's notion of "double mimesis" to indicate the performative nature of masquerade and its potential for gender parody:

"The concept of the masquerade allows us to see what gender parody takes as its object is not the image of the woman, but the idea—which in camp, becomes a joke—that an essential feminine identity exists prior to the image. [...] Gender parody would utilize masquerade self-consciously in order to reveal the absence behind the mask and the performative activity of gender and sexual identities" (12-13).

I follow Robertson in seeing feminist camp as occupying and producing "queer" discursive spaces that are "non-, anti-, or contra-straight." *Dirty Picture* seems to emulate *Om Shanti Om* in reimagining a bygone era of movie making, especially the 1980s. While the story is set in the South Indian film industry, the film's references are mostly rooted in 1980s Hindi popular cinema. *Dirty Picture*'s camp aesthetic mainly comes across through dialogue, art direction, music, and its use of the figure of the vamp; all four elements serve to mark the film as a reimagining of the 1980s and simultaneously distance viewers with a tongue-in-cheek presentation. *Dirty Picture* is not a period piece seeking to create authenticity but rather a contemporary film overtly looking back at 1980s cinema.

*Dirty Picture* harkens back to the era of *dialoguebaazi*, where audiences reveled in the dramatic monologues of the heroes and villains; their larger-than-life characters would get a further boost with elaborate lines that almost stopped the narrative action to evoke viewer appreciation and applause. *Dirty Picture* is rife with punch lines, such as "Silk's logic was simple and correct: when God has given us one life, then why think twice?" or "Films work because of only three reasons: entertainment, entertainment, entertainment. And, I am entertainment." The interesting deviation from the norm in *Dirty Picture* is that Silk has the facility with this dramatic verbal flourish instead of the usual male protagonist. Film reviews mention audiences in theaters cheering and whistling as Silk delivers





Silk Smitha in *Moondram Pirai* (1982).

these punch lines (Bhelari 2011). This response indicates an interesting spectatorial dynamic: on the one hand, viewers can continue to view her as the vamp, the spectacular sexual object, but on the other hand, viewer identification can also take place as Silk firmly occupies the diegetic space typically reserved for the hero.

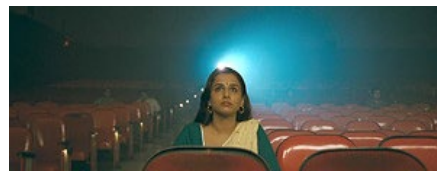
The art direction and soundtrack in *Dirty Picture* also add to its camp appeal. The music directors, Vishal and Shekhar, bring in a retro-sound with the soundtrack, especially the extremely popular song “Ooh La La,” which follows the structure of most songs produced in the 1980s complete with a loud and catchy *dhol* (drums) beat, background chorus, duet between the male and female lead singers, and a disco mix. The choice of Bappi Lahiri—the music director and singer well known for disco music in the 80s, such as *Disco Dancer*, *Namakhahal*, and *Sharaabi*—as the male singer is key in the film’s audiovisual camp style. The heavy breathing and exclamations that are part of the song add to its aural parody of the heterosexual romance portrayed in 1970s and 80s films, where sex had to be suggested but not explicitly shown. The garish set design and costumes—reminiscent of Jeetendra and Sridevi’s 1983 hit *Himmatwala* and Kamal Hassan and Silk Smitha’s 1982 film *Moondram Pirai*, which was remade a year later as *Sadma*—bring in elements of visual spectacle and excess as an in-joke with audiences who simultaneously laugh at and are nostalgic for the dated content on display.



*Dirty Picture* recreating Silk Smitha’s dance number in *Moondram Pirai*.



Reshma’s first performance as a dancer caters to the voyeuristic look of the camera and the male gaze.



Reshma watching herself as Silk on the big screen.



The male viewers cheer for Silk, but do not recognize the very real Reshma sitting in the theater.

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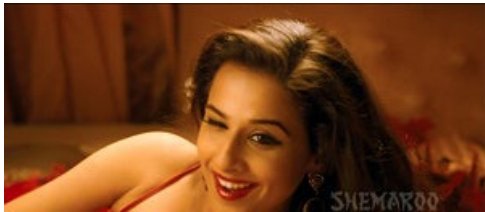
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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Silk laughs at the camera as she poses nude in her bathtub.



Silk winks at the camera after simulating an orgasm.

Most importantly, the film's use of camp aesthetic to present the 80s vamp as a masquerade complicates a simply spectacular engagement with the female body on the screen. Reshma often winks at the producer or director and laughs at the camera, introducing play, as she performs her oversexed body as Silk, thus frequently interrupting the gazed-at-body on screen with the "real" material body of the actress. Her role encourages spectatorial cognizance of the ideological and industrial paradigms within which the female actress works to produce both desire and profit. Balan as Reshma in *Dirty Picture* subverts the economic and affective discourses that seek to contain her as transgressive and pornographic.

For instance, in one scene in the film, we see multiple shots of men in cinema theaters libidinally whistling and cheering as Silk dances suggestively on the big screen. As the predominantly male audience throws money at the screen as token of their desire, the film establishes a resonance between the initial economic-affective transaction of Reshma being sexually propositioned by the man in the film theater and this exchange between the male spectators and Silk, the female sex-object on the screen. *Dirty Picture* demonstrates its awareness of how the female actor negotiates complicated circuits of sexuality, representation, and the film "industry" by having Reshma watch her cinematic *avatar* in the film hall. The juxtaposition between the "real" and "imagined" woman in this scene visually gestures towards the mostly binary representation of femininities in Indian cinema that has strictly defined both normative femininities and deviations (Rajan 1993).

The vamp as camp also potentially produces a unique space for female spectatorship within the Hindi film audience—something that Robertson identifies as combining passivity and activity, affirmation and critique (16). Camp here becomes "a kind of parodic play between subject and object in which the female spectator laughs at and plays with her own image—in other words, to imagine her distancing herself from her own image by making fun of, and out of, that image—without losing sight of the real power that image has over her" (17). As scholars writing on camp have noted time and again, the camp way of looking and evoking affect, this kind of viewing practice, is not necessarily available universally, but instead it depends on "the eye of the beholder" (Core & Melly, 1984, 82). Thus, it is quite possible for the general audience to view the film's configuration of normative femininity unproblematically. Indeed, the use of filmmaker Abraham's voice as narratorial voiceover as well as Silk's bitter and lonely suicide dressed as a traditional Hindu bride allow for a conventional viewing which affirms dominant narratives about morality, sexuality, and honor. However, the recurrent introduction of ironic distance between the viewer and the spectacularized female body on the screen in *Dirty Picture* constantly interrupt, problematize, and ridicule these models of normative ideologies.

In another film, in contrast to the overtly campy interrogation of nostalgia in *Dirty Picture*, *Kahaani* seems to arouse nostalgia for the typical femininity of the Hindi film heroine as the 'Indian' wife and mother (to be), but this film might actually be read as the most nuanced manifestation of Balan's dissonant star text. Here Balan plays the part of "Vidya," the film repeatedly drawing attention to her name and the regional pronunciation of the same, complicating the separation between the real actor and her fictional character. Balan-as-Vidya in the film appears visibly vulnerable and in need of help as a pregnant woman searching for her missing husband. However, despite appearing as a mother-to-be, Vidya's identity as an NRI woman interrupts the simple equation of motherhood with traditionalism. For example, in the introductory scene, she seems bewildered and annoyed by the clamor of taxi drivers wanting to claim her as a passenger—a



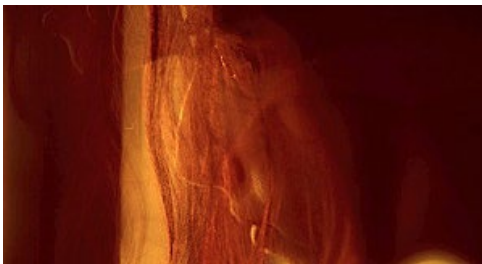
Rana holds Vidya's hand after she stumbles and almost falls in a narrow lane in *Kahaani* (2012).



Vidya blends into a crowd of women gathered for *sindoor khela*.



Vidya attempting to covertly use police database as Rana grapples with their physical proximity.



Mellow music and soft light come into play as Rana remembers Vidya's closeness to him.

reaction that establishes her as an outsider unused to rigors of travel in India. It functions much like another scene which depicts her frustration at not being able to properly drape a *saree*.

As the filmic narrative unfolds, it further ruptures cinematic nostalgia for typical 'Indian' femininity by conflating the passive woman/mother with the wily detective figure, a traditional masculine role, as well as with the avenging woman. Like *Dirty Picture*, Balan's body on screen again becomes spectacular, but this time her pregnancy—a physical manifestation of her character's vulnerability—becomes the site of performance. Vidya walks with the awkward gait of a heavily pregnant woman, lowers herself gingerly onto a chair, and almost trips several times. Simultaneously, however, she complicates this overt physicality with a cerebral presence: she is a coder who hacks into IT systems to find relevant information; she is a detective who approaches the case of her missing husband with logic and precision. The pregnancy itself is revealed as a disguise precisely when Vidya appears in her most traditional attire, the white sari with red border associated with *sindoor khela*, a ritual celebrating fertility.

Rosie Thomas has famously argued that the mother in the worldview of Hindi popular cinema symbolizes both the morally 'good' and values that are perceived as 'Indian,' thereby rooting the "ideal moral universe" in "a discourse of traditionalism and nationalism" (160). Indeed, the mythic parallels of Balan as Vidya with the mother goddess Durga defeating evil, which were present in *Bhool Bhulaiya*, are employed here in a much more overt fashion. In keeping with the Bengali lore of the mother goddess visiting her devotees on earth for ten days before returning back to her heavenly abode, "Vidya" arrives in Kolkata just as the city is getting ready for Durga Puja. The repeated use of shots of the *pratima* (idol) being brought in for *protishtha* (ritual that establishes an idol as the goddess manifest) and scenes of devotees engaged in worship work to engrain the goddess mythology as a meaningful motif. The climactic scenes where "Vidya" fatally shoots the terrorist Milan Damji and disappears into a sea of women wearing the traditional white sari with red border have a symbolic parallel with the goddess Durga killing the demon Mahishasura and then leaving earth through the ritual of *visarjan* (immersion in water). If viewers were in any danger of missing the overlaps between motherhood, traditional femininity, and Hindu nationalism, the voiceover by Bachchan reiterates,

"It is said that the power of all mothers was combined to create Mother Durga. Every year, she comes, destroys all evil, and returns; all so that we can live without fear and in peace."

Through Vidya's relationship with Rana, *Kahaani* not only engages in a reversal of gender roles, where the former becomes the decision maker and the latter becomes the follower, but the film also subtly presents a form of sexuality and desire which is quite taboo and thus mostly absent from depictions of romance in popular Hindi cinema. The film brings together an almost textbook Freudian narrative of psychosexual development by presenting viewers with Rana; he's a young novice cop whom everyone addresses by his 'pet-name,' highlighting his youth, who lives with his mother, and who appears quite star-struck by the older, decisive, and technologically-savvy Vidya.

The scene where Vidya and Rana covertly access police records to ascertain the identities of those killed at the Nonapukur tram depot foregrounds Rana's desire for Vidya. As Vidya leans in to use the computer, Rana's reactions of nervousness and stolen glances at her express his simultaneous awareness of her physical





Vidya with her husband Arnab played here by Indraneil Sengupta.



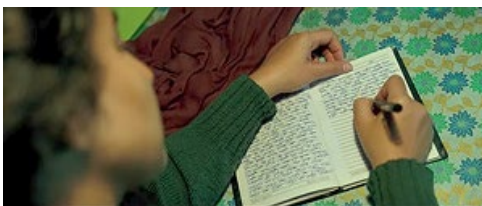
Vidya killing Milan Damji, played again by Sengupta.



Balan appears completely deglamorized as Durga in *Kahaani 2* (2016).



Suspecting Minnie to be a victim of sexual abuse, Durga coaxes the mostly silent kid out of her shell.



proximity and his desire for her. The film uses background music (a mellow ballad-like tune played on an electric guitar), close-ups of Balan's face, soft light, and slow motion to posit Vidya as the object of desire for Rana. The erotics of the gaze in Rana's adoration of Vidya, especially in light of the goddess mythology invoked throughout the film, also coalesces here with the modality of *darshana*, which brings together the audience's idolization of Balan as star with the diegetic expression of desire, thus allowing Vidya's presence to exceed being an object of desire. In another crucial scene, Rana protectively holds Vidya's hand after she almost stumbles and falls. Other than flashbacks, where Vidya shares an intimate interpersonal relationship with her husband, there are no other scenes in the film that highlight touch other than this. It is only after these pivotal moments that Rana, who deferentially calls her "Mrs. Bagchi" for most of the film, addresses Vidya by her first name, signifying a growing closeness between the two.

Significantly, another layer of dissonance, which occurs during the climax, also complicates the trope of the loyal wife seeking justice for her husband's death. Throughout the film, Vidya fondly remembers her husband, played by Indraneil Sengupta. Suddenly, viewers come face to face with Sengupta playing Damji. Since the same actor plays the parts of both her husband and the terrorist (the "real" husband is revealed to viewers only in the last ten minutes of the film), it seems as if Vidya's husband and the terrorist are the same person, so Balan-as-Vidya becomes at once the goddess killing the demon and a wife killing her husband—her dissonant star-text allowing for both meanings to emerge simultaneously.

## Conclusion

Balan's star-text remains rife with productive contradictions even after her marriage, a life choice after which the film industry expects female actors to pack-up their careers and move discreetly to TV reality shows and miscellaneous commercials. While media scrutinized her yet again non-normative star body (married, 38, non-child-bearing, weight issues), Balan played the part of Durga Rani Singh in *Kahaani 2* (2016), a mother who protects her adopted daughter from sexual abuse and *Begum Jaan* (2017), a brothel owner fighting against displacement due to partition. In *Kahaani 2*, Balan not only appeared without any make-up but also in completely deglamorized, almost frumpy attire. In an interview, Balan pointed to this deglamorized look as the result of the director's conceptualization of the character of Durga Rani Singh: her self-hatred as a result of childhood sexual abuse and a failed marriage (*Roundtable with Rajeev Masand* 2016). However, in terms of the media discourse around her, which focused yet again on her weight gain and her possible pregnancy or lack thereof, coupled with media buzz about celebrity pregnancies, such as Kareena Kapoor's, Balan's decision to play the part of a struggling single mother in faded sarees and frayed blouses directly contradicted the formations of hegemonic femininity on and off-screen.

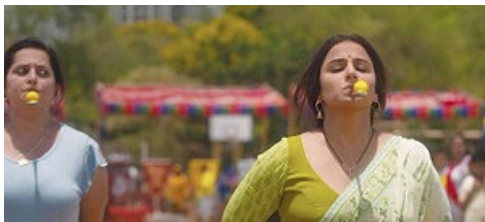
The filmic narrative in *Kahaani 2*, much like *Kahaani*, gestured towards roles that are the cornerstones of traditional Indian femininity, but it added ideological frisson to their execution: Balan as Durga, later adopting the identity of Vidya Sinha, portrays a woman who chooses to protect a vulnerable child from a bad early marriage; Durga heroically rescues Minnie from the latter's abusive uncle and complicit grandmother even at the cost of sacrificing the certainties of her own life. The script interrogates ways of cinematic telling where the male voiceover conveys universality and knowledge (Silverman, 1988, 46). Indeed, in *Kahaani 2*, through the ploy of Inderjeet reading Durga's diary, *Kahaani 2* invests knowledge and empathy in Durga's voiceover as she guides viewers through the complex events of the past.

The decision to give Durga authorial presence counteracts the sociocultural silencing of victims of sexual abuse. The choice to retell the story through Durga's voiceover becomes even more significant as it also takes the shape of Inderjeet

Durga has narrative authority in the film through her diary, which privileges her perspective.



The film tells Durga and Minnie's story through the ploy of Inderjeet reading Durga's diary



The opening scene *Tumhari Sulu* (2017) shows Sulu competing in a lemon-on-the-spoon race.



Sulu's first audition at the radio station.

realizing how patriarchal expectations about his spouse (through an arranged marriage) had kept him from understanding and empathizing with the reality of a woman carrying the baggage of a traumatic past. Thus, the narrative unfolding dramatizes a process of discovery, uncovering, and self-understanding for both characters, and it simultaneously makes a case for the replacement of conventional roles and desires with a more egalitarian and companionate relationship between men and women, especially husbands and wives.

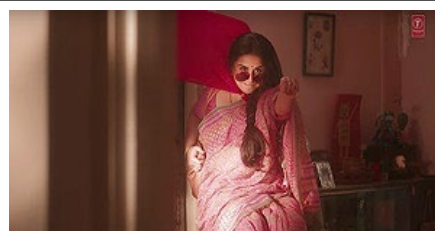
In one of her biggest films post-marriage, *Tumhari Sulu* (2017), Balan plays the part of a traditional lower middle-class Mumbai housewife—"saari-waali bhabhi"—who transforms on the radio into a husky-voiced, sex-appeal-oozing RJ. The film's greatest strength lies in drawing from the dissonance of Balan's star-text. The character Sulu is a typical urban, middle-class Indian woman; in fact, she appears to be a woman excluded from the neo-liberal narratives of self-definition and empowerment since she failed twelfth grade and flits from one interest to another unlike her well-educated, gainfully-employed bank-clerk sisters, until she chances upon the idea of becoming a radio-show host. While in no way ignoring the capitalistic underpinnings of media, specifically the Indian radio channels, which have burgeoned since the 1990s, Sulu's journey towards self-definition definitely complicates typical narratives of modern femininity that center around education. The evolution of her selfhood lies in obfuscation and simultaneous performance of sensuous femininity. The film foregrounds femininity as performance almost at the very beginning when the writer/producer of the show, Pankaj, simulates a breathy voice and uses suggestive words,

"I'm here to light up your nights and make your dreams come true."

At this point, Sulu explodes into a fit of giggles at the incongruity between actor and act. In the following meeting, Pankaj offers an innuendo-laced, semi-pornographic response to a lonely auto-rickshaw driver calling in, while Sulu rejects that performance as artificial and vulgar. Instead, as per the channel head Maria's suggestion that she imagine she's talking to her husband, Sulu brings in an affective rhetoric that is companionate and domestic:

"Sulu wants you to take her for a ride around Mumbai. And, when you return home tired, I'll massage your head. And if that isn't enough, I'll squeeze your neck (*gala daba doon*). And if even that isn't enough, I'll make you do all the laundry. Now stop making excuses and listen to this song."

While a simple transformation from domestic femininity to hypersexual femininity might have allowed the binary to remain unquestioned, Sulu's character allows for a more subversive intermingling of the intimate and personal with the public and commercial. For instance, when a caller requests her that she sing a "romantic song," Sulu proceeds to sing the song that she and her husband bond over. The film explores the complications that arise when gestures of intimacy, desire, and private sexuality become public.



Blending the heroic and the ordinary in Sulu's character.



Homage to Sridevi's popular song *hawa hawai* in *Tumhari Sulu*.



The mix of the *saree* with cape on the promotional poster of *Tumhari Sulu* (2017) visualizes dissonant femininities at play.

In an apt move that resonated with the centrality of cultural nostalgia in Balan's star-text, *Tumhari Sulu* also uses viewer nostalgia for 1980s and 90s Hindi film music, which not only functions as a smart hook for a section of the audience who have grown up with songs, such as *koel si teri boli* ("your words are musical like a nightingale") from *Beta* (1992) or *batata vada* ("potato fritters") from *Hifazat* (1987), but also evokes cinephilia to establish viewer rapport with Sulu's character. The use of *hawa hawai* ("the winds from Hawaii"), a well-known song from *Mr. India*, is especially significant as it forges through the form of a "tribute" a connection between the histrionic abilities of the celebrated Hindi film actress, Sridevi, particularly her facility with comedy, and Balan's foray into a comic role (Gopal 2017).

Sulu's presence continues to complicate the persona of a sexy late-night radio show host: she often cuts vegetables as she chats with the callers. The ludicrous juxtaposition of these most homely of acts, for instance, shelling peas, with the semi-erotic nature of the conversation creates comedy for viewers, humanizes Sulu, and, most importantly for this essay, gestures back to the dissonance of Balan's star-text. Even the promotional poster for the film, which brings together the quotidian and the super-heroic, suggests that the tensions that characterize Balan's star-text continue to shape her filmic narratives and our reception of the same and gives us insight into how boundaries of sexual desirability, gendered bodies, and acceptable or transgressive identities are negotiated and managed in contemporary Hindi cinema.

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### Notes

1. *Tambram* is a term in popular usage that is used to refer to Tamil Brahmins and connotes adherence to traditional Hindu, upper-caste social values. [[return to page 1](#)]
2. The historical origins of the term date back to the seventeenth century when a nineteen-year old medical student, Johannes Hofer, identified this condition in his dissertation to diagnose Swiss mercenaries with a specific physiological ailment: the pain (*algos*) for home (*nostos*).
3. Susan Stewart, for instance, has seen nostalgia as a diseased state of mind that sees the present in terms of lack and transfers immediacy and authenticity to the past. Frederic Jameson specifically characterizes the “nostalgia film” of the 1970s and 80s as a manipulation of the past, as the hollowing out and commodification of history. By distorting the past or reducing it to empty style without content, nostalgia obscures or erases the historical and material conditions of capitalist power structures and increasingly destroys our ability to understand the historical past in authentic and productive ways. In a similar approach, one that sees nostalgia linked to commodification, Paul Grainge understands the packaging of 1990s black and white cinema as “classic” as a symptom of global consumerism. Hutcheon meanwhile looks towards “the double-voice irony” of postmodern parody as a means of countering “debilitating” effects of nostalgia.
4. DeFalco, in fact, proposes that we consider the possibility of “productive nostalgia,” which can “affect and provoke” viewers, that is have an emotional and intellectual impact, thereby producing what Peter and Will Brooker have theorized as “active spectatorship”: a self-conscious, non-passive, intellectual engagement with the film’s obvious textuality.
5. Following Dyer, recent scholarship has consciously moved away from the charismatic reading of the star to emphasize how stardom comes about as a result of collective effort, “a product of industrialized cultural production” (Becker, 1982; McDonald, 2013). Even as such readings quite appropriately identify the star as a commodity with symbolic significance whose purchase is still economic, the ideological implications of the star-text still remain culturally crucial and of more import in this essay than the commercial logic of stardom.
6. Within Indian film studies, there have been several interesting approaches to theorizing stardom: Usha Iyer (2015) explores the relationship of dance to stardom; besides the films of 1930s and 40s, Majumdar also works on the stardom of vocal artistes, like Lata and Asha Mangeshkar; Vijay Mishra (2002) discusses Amitabh Bachchan as “parallel text”; M. Madhava Prasad (2014) discusses intersections between stardom and politics; Charlie Henniker (2010) examines how Hindi film stars, such as SRK, function as gay icons.
7. See Asha Kasbekar’s *Pop Culture India!* and Rachel Dwyer chapter on Stardust in *Pleasure and the Nation* for a more detailed discussion of film magazines.
8. As noted in Partha Chatterjee’s seminal text, the Indian nationalist response to colonial modernity resulted in the gendering of social roles as well as a

simultaneous Western-material-world-masculine versus Eastern-spiritual-home-feminine bifurcation (Chatterjee, 1993: 116-134).

9. Nandana Bose cites the rise of multiplex theater and the concomitant rise of 'feminist' female roles in Hindi cinema and TV as the reason behind Balan's stardom. While Bose's reading is entirely relevant, I contend that the rise of multiplex cinema doesn't completely account for Balan's unprecedented success or her intriguing star-text that combines traditional 'Indianness' with subversive femininities (Bose, 2014: 394-409).

10. As evidence of the powerful impact *Parineeta* had on Balan's identity as a film actress, we should consider how right after the success of the said film, Balan became involved in multiple period cinema projects, such as Pradeep Sarkar's intended remake of *Devi Choudhurani*, Sudhir Mishra's *Bahut Nikle Mere Arman*, and Rituparno Ghosh's remake of *Sahib Biwi Aur Ghulam*. However, most of these projects were either shelved, or, as in the case of Mishra's film, were completed sans Balan. [[return to page 2](#)]

11. Balan worked in a series of films from 2006 to 2008, like *Lage Raho Munnabhai* (2006), *Hey Baby* (2007), *Salaam-e-Ishq* (2007), *Guru* (2007), *Kismat Connection* (2008), and *Halla Bol* (2008), for which she either received poor reviews or lukewarm praise. In a recent interview, Balan herself rued the decision to work in films that did not highlight her talent and only allowed her a modicum of screen time (Rajeev Masand, *Actresses Roundtable*, 2016).

12. Ramna Walia remarks on the overlaps between nostalgia and remakes in popular Hindi cinema, especially in post-1990s decades: "This ostensible investment in nostalgia associated with cultural pasts influences the various decisions regarding the remake: the set, location, set design, publicity as well as the formulaic expectations of the audience."

13. While the title of the film evokes associations with the legend of the famous labyrinth, the *bhool bhulaiya*, at Bada Imambara in Lucknow, the film is set in Varanasi. Shot at the Chomu Palace in Jaipur as well as in Varanasi, *Bhool Bhulaiya* employs the various *ghaats* and temples in Varanasi, such as the Bhonsale *ghaat*, as well as the fortified *haveli* in Rajasthan to configure a space (which is problematic in its lack of regional specificity and fetishized approach to objects sans context) of ancient Hinduism, devout practice of the faith, and decaying nobility.

14. While Creed is discussing witches, the representation of the female malevolent ghost in horror films also offers up similar tensions between patriarchy and the feminine.

15. See, for instance, Jindals's discussion of infertility as a socio-cultural problem (1989, 30-33).

16. See Christopher Pinney and Shaila Bhatti's discussion of *darshana* as specifically South Asian form of visuality that interrupt and complicates the typical model of individualized experience of the western film viewer (2011).

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A colorful publicity image for the 2016 Egyptian film *Gahim Fel Hend* shows its cast outfitted in South Asian attire, previewing the film's homage to popular Indian films



A poster for *Gahim Fel Hend* similarly emphasizes the film's Bollywood-inspired song-dance attractions and mise-en-scène.

## Curatorial reflections on *Letters of Love (LOL) from the Middle East to South Asia* — a trio of transregional genre comedies

by [Samhita Sunya](#)

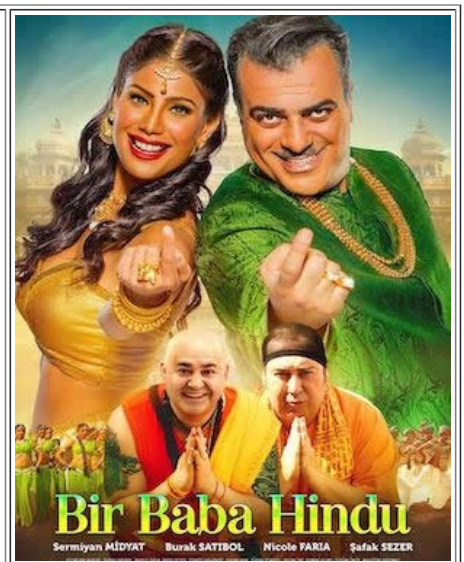
In Spring, 2018, I was invited to curate a film series while in residence at the MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale University. By coincidence, after at least two years of several wrong numbers, unanswered Facebook/Twitter direct messages, and misdirected e-mails, I found myself in conversation with the respective producers and distributors of three films whose English-subtitled versions I had been seeking, as possible additions to an introductory survey course on Middle East-South Asia film history. A bread-and-butter offering that emerged directly from my research interests, the course was designed to highlight the prolific, decades-long movement and interconnectedness of films, film industry personnel, and film genres across the Middle East and South Asia.

As delighted as I was to have finally found these additional producer/distributor contacts for pedagogical purposes, I was even more delighted by the serendipitously imminent possibility of publicly screening the three films as a package. The films – *Road to Kabul* (Brahim Chkiri, 2012), *Bir Baba Hindu* (Sermiyan Midyat, 2016), and *Gahim Fel Hend* (Moataz Eltony, 2016), from Morocco, Turkey, and Egypt, respectively – are contemporary, popular comedies. Each of the three films is centrally oriented around a journey towards South Asia and replete with references to both Hollywood and Bollywood films.[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] The package was debuted in a special preview presentation at Yale in April 2018, followed by a November 2018 premiere at the Virginia Film Festival.

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A poster for *Road to Kabul* emphasizes the film's action sequences.



A poster for *Bir Baba Hindu* emphasizes the film's Bollywood-inspired song-dance attractions and mise-en-scène.



A production still from a song-dance sequence in *Bir Baba Hindu* spotlights Nicole Faria, an Indian beauty queen and actress who co-stars in the film alongside Turkish filmmaker-actor Sermiyan Midyat.



A production still from *Bir Baba Hindu* shows Ejder the Elder, a Turk who has “gone native” in India as an Eastern monk. Poking fun at (and poking through) the commodification of Eastern spirituality as ostensibly holding traditional, age-old panaceas for the stresses of contemporary life, we see Ejder using a selfie stick to maintain his shaven, monk hairstyle.

Titled *Letters of Love (LOL) from the Middle East to South Asia: A Trio of Transregional Genre Comedies*, the package showcased three witty films from the Middle East, a region that, especially in U.S. contexts, is all-too-often conflated with footage of war, authoritarianism, crises, and patriarchal/sexual violence.[2] In an attempt to resist a reductive conflation of the Middle East solely with violence and turmoil, on the one hand, and to highlight the varied filmmaking and film-viewing practices in the region, on the other, *LOL* spotlighted three zany, popular transregional comedies that had not been publicly screened in the U.S. prior to the special preview presentation at Yale. All of the films are comedies whose action takes place across the Middle East and South Asia, as they self-reflexively — and lovingly — pay homage to global genres (stoner comedy, road movie, gangster comedy, musical comedy) as well as the longstanding presence and popularity of commercial Indian films in the Middle East. What follows is a reflection over this three-film package, emerging from the interstices of curatorial, pedagogical, and scholarly inquiries.

## Establishing shots

It was while living and teaching at the American University of Beirut from 2014-16 that I had first come across a review of *Road to Kabul*, a 2012 Moroccan stoner-comedy-cum-road-movie that emerged as that year's hit film. What piqued my initial interest in the film was its status as popular, commercially successful “terror comedy” from the Global South, alongside a handful of films that included the Indian films *Bangistan* (Karan Anshuman, 2015), *Tere Bin Laden* (Abhishek Sharma, 2010) and, eventually, its sequel *Tere Bin Laden: Dead or Alive* (Abhishek Sharma, 2016). Regarding *Road to Kabul*'s record-breaking blockbuster status upon its 2012 release in Morocco, a January 2013 piece in *L'Observateur* noted:

“Eight months in theaters, with more than 300,000 admissions already, [director] Brahim Chkiri's debut breaks all records of Moroccan cinema. His secret? There are several of them...”

“In turning out ‘Road to Kabul,’ Brahim Chkiri did not predict the fabulous destiny of his first feature film. Yet, the lucky director of this film has combined all the ingredients of a blockbuster with local color. Funny, infinitely entertaining with a good dose of action, this comedy for the public offers a comical universe inhabited by characters who are as far-fetched as they are deep (Idrissi 2013; translation my own).”





A production still from *Road to Kabul* shows a small-time crime boss. He is a minor character early in the film, who bullies the young protagonists for whom hash is a precious respite as employment remains elusive.

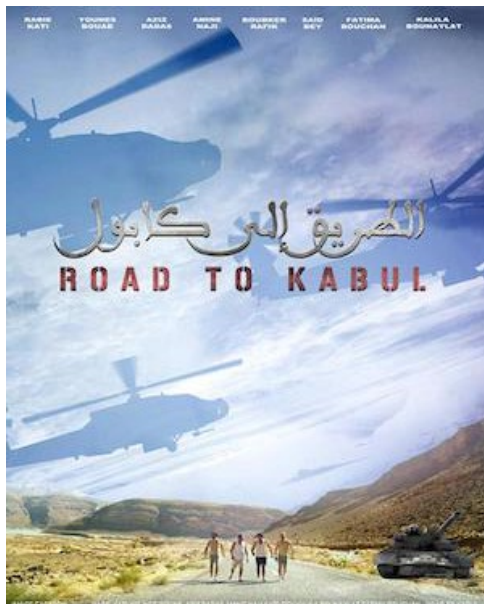


A production still from *Road to Kabul* shows a smiling Ali, who is one among the close-knit group of cannabis-loving friends featured as the main characters.

Multiple reviews similarly accounted for the film's status as a huge hit in the combination of its action-packed plot, actors' performances, memorable characters, and overall hilarity and relatability. As a result of its tremendous box office success, I did not expect that the film would *not* be readily available – for viewing and teaching – through an official DVD release. Although I found grainy, pirated versions of the film with French subtitles circulating online, it was not until August 2016, after multiple attempts at cold-calling, social media messaging, and e-mailing, that a response arrived from Mohamed Rezqi of Image Factory Maroc, the producer of *Road to Kabul*.

Rezqi was incredibly kind, offering to share a high-resolution digital copy of the film with English subtitles, free of any charge for classroom purposes. But he was also intrigued, wondering what I would think of the film and expressing doubt over U.S. students' ability to "understand that [the film is] just a series of nonsense jokes," even suggesting that I might instead consider – as far as contemporary Arab films go – something like Nadine Labaki's 2007 "excellent film" *Caramel* for the classroom. After watching the film myself, I wrote to Rezqi:

"I think it is very important for students to be exposed to all genres and all kinds of films – from serious documentaries, to art films, to 'silly,' popular comedies. I think that this helps them understand how rich film is, all over the world. It will also help American students realize that there is so much enjoyment in the Middle East – it is a place of youth and fun and playfulness, and hardly, in many places, [reducible only to] what you see on the news here..."



Another poster for *Road to Kabul* suggests the stylized action-comedy proclivities of the film, as the mise-en-scène includes four men barefoot in their underwear on an open road, amongst tanks and helicopters.



As emphasized by *Road to Kabul*'s titular references to the 1942 Hollywood classic *Road to Morocco*, Michael Winterbottom's 2006 docudrama *The Road to Guantánamo*, and, most prominently, the 2008 stoner comedy *Harold and Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay*, the film contains a cocktail of references to Hollywood and the War on Terror, as two sides of the same coin in terms of the ubiquity of the U.S.'s presence in the Middle East. The protagonists are a group of five young men, all whom have turned to marijuana in the absence of gainful employment. They dream of emigrating to Amsterdam – for both work and, of course, cannabis – and they decide to all contribute to a fund for at least one of them to go. When they happen to later find out that the lucky one – Hmida – was sent off with a visa to Afghanistan instead of the Netherlands, the remaining four, plus Hmida's frantic mother, take the wily visa broker Ouchen to task and drag him along on a roadtrip, as they set off to find their friend and retrieve him from Afghanistan.

Its lightness and slapstick notwithstanding, the film takes on a number of poignant issues, including: the difficulties of finding employment, repeatedly

A group of friends together dream of emigrating and finding employment outside Morocco. Their idling, as stoners, is motivated by the film's stoner-comedy genre as well as the acute issue of youth unemployment and disaffection that was repeatedly invoked as underlying the various Arab Spring protests that had begun a year earlier in the region

noted as an issue that was central to the contemporaneous Arab Spring uprisings; the red tape and money involved in applying for and procuring visas for immigration; the recruitment and radicalization of young, disaffected Muslims – in many cases a result of Islamophobia and racism faced in European and North American contexts – by groups such as ISIS and the Taliban; the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq; the destruction of ancient archaeological and heritage objects in the throes of the War on Terror; and drug trafficking. Rezqi's own worry that the U.S. students would not understand that *Road to Kabul* is "just a series of nonsense jokes" may seem, on the one hand, to undercut the film's own critical import; but on the other, his comment points to the specificity of layered in-jokes and intertextual references that comprise the highly localized address – glossed as "local color" in the aforementioned *L'Observateur* report – of popular comedies, and the ensuing challenges of translation posed by this specificity.

## Locations of humor

In a recent, prescient analysis of realism and comedy in screenings of *Sangre* (Amat Escalante, 2004) and *Albüm* (Mehmet Can Mertoğlu, 2016) at the 2016 Sarajevo Film Festival, Emre Caglayan notes,

"The distinction between laughing at and laughing with, when combined with the conundrum of hesitation, brings about an interesting set of tensions on how different audiences react to the same film" (Caglayan 2018).

Caglayan frames his discussion of laughter, ethics, and political correctness through a distinction between laughing *with*, versus laughing *at*, characters and films, particularly when they are beheld by audiences as fundamentally inferior. He notes the critical potential of instances of comedic realism that allow audiences to examine and question both the most banal of daily routines that become objects of the films' ambivalent humor, as well as the very ethics of their laughter. As both *Sangre* and *Albüm* share slow pacing, deadpan humor, and realist aesthetics that mark out their address towards transnational festival and arthouse circuits, Caglayan emphasizes the self-awareness with which the films' invitation to laugh at certain moments remains fraught, as an ethical question for audiences to weigh.

In the case of the *LOL* package, a very different set of dynamics plays out in terms of the politics of the films' address and humor, as the films are oriented neither towards a transnational festival circuit nor towards realist modes of humor. In his recent monograph on Latin American cinema between the 1930s and 1960s Nilo Couret notes the insights to be gained through scholarly attention to comedy and genre in non-Euro-American contexts:

"Comedy not only designates a genre where a differentiated hermeneutic can yield varied social forms disarticulated from pregiven territorial formations, but it also compels us to reflect on the conditions of possibility of signification within the semiotic and social field. The untranslatability of comedy points to a hermeneutic circle that can never be foreclosed, where forces intrinsic and extrinsic to this circle are continually shaping the horizon of reception." (Couret 12).

In *Road to Kabul*, *Bir Baba Hindu*, and *Gahim Fel Hend*, humor is far more slapstick than ambivalent, and in several moments, highly politically incorrect on the surface. As overtly commercial productions that were not aimed primarily at festival circuits, the films' promotional materials, including trailers and posters, emphasize the entertainment value of their comedic genre proclivities (e.g., known comedic actors, body humor, and fast-paced dialogues heavy with wordplay). A discussion of the three films remains nonetheless pertinent within a

broadier discussion of the stakes raised by Couret's work, in addition to Caglayan's analysis: of humor, ethics, and political correctness in cinema; of laughing *at* versus laughing *with*; and of jokes that become not just lost, but also fraught in new ways, in their translation across audiences and locations.

While any critical engagement with the films cannot elide the ridiculously stereotypical depictions of either the Afghanistan of *Road to Kabul*, or of the India of *Bir Baba Hindu* and *Gahim Fel Hend*, I want to also suggest that the extent of this ridiculousness becomes so extreme as to potentially implode – that is, increasingly pried away from possibilities of being read as realistic through the extent of the films' bizarre narratives, characters, and humor. As a curatorial endeavor, the package invited audiences to contemplate and participate in conversations over the critical potential of the humor in all three films, while simultaneously acknowledging the slipperiness and limits of any comedy that takes recourse to ethnic stereotypes. A key frame for these conversations was an emphasis, in short-form curatorial notes and introductory remarks, upon the films' address towards a primary audience familiar with – and likely to pick up on a slew of references to – Hollywood and, particularly in the case of *Bir Baba Hindu* and *Gahim Fel Hend*, Bollywood cinema as well.

## Popular cinemas, between genre and mise-en-scène: *Bir Baba Hindu* and *Gahim Fel Hend*

Produced by major production companies in Turkey and Egypt, respectively, and released in 2016, both *Bir Baba Hindu* and *Gahim Fel Hend* feature exuberant song-dance numbers, scenes shot on location in India in collaboration with Indian cast and crew, and action-romance plots interwoven with comedy. These similarities are noteworthy, in drawing attention to the longstanding transregional circulation of popular Indian films, frequently beloved for, and dismissed as, being little more than vacuous, nonsensical entertainment (Armbrust 2008). Emerging in pitched political contexts of surveillance, the films' recourse not only to Hollywood citations but also Bollywood clichés equated with the nonsensical, becomes potentially strategic. The primary national-political contexts and targets of the both films' comedy, as well as their respective homages to the song-dance pleasures of Hindi cinema, inject their mobilizations of ethnic humor and racial stereotypes with a tongue-in-cheek self-awareness of their very incorrectness, to a significant degree.

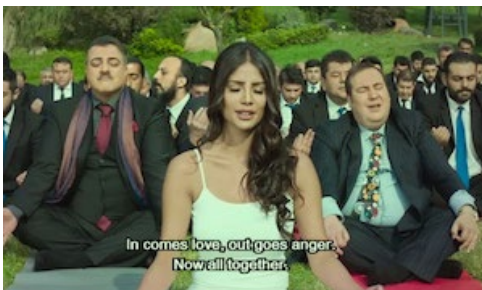
*Bir Baba Hindu* unfolds as a gangster comedy, starring director Sermiyan Midyat in the lead role as Fadil, the son of a Turkish mafioso who is poised to become the next don. He realizes, however, that the gangster lifestyle – with regular shootings and rowdy fights and whatnot – brings on quite a bit of stress. So, Fadil and his fellow gangsters decide to practice yoga and meditation to de-stress after their shootouts. Fadil soon falls in love with his Indian yoga instructor Gundhi, and when she is suddenly captured in Istanbul and taken back to Bombay, he goes to Bombay to find her. Self-consciously deploying globalized clichés of India as a land of cows, yoga, and Bollywood, the film takes an eccentric premise and not merely runs with it, but breaks out in full song and dance to absurd ends.

By the time of *Bir Baba Hindu*'s release, Sermiyan Midyat was known as a writer, director, comic actor, and activist hailing from the minority Kurdish community in Turkey. In June 2013, as the state escalated its crackdown on protestors in Gezi Park, media outlets shied away from covering any of the violence, fearing the consequences of appearing sympathetic to the protestors (Öztürkmen 2014). When CNN Turk instead aired a documentary about penguins as the crackdowns came to a head, the figure of the penguin subsequently became central to several jokes and memes that critiqued the state crackdown and media's de facto censorship of the violence (Öztürkmen 2014).

It was in this context that Sermiyan Midyat famously appeared in a CNN Turk



An aerial shot of a street scene in Bombay in *Bir Baba Hindu* establishes the mise-en-scène of an Indian city in a manner that is similar to *Gahim Fel Hend* in its depiction of traffic, auto rickshaws, and iconic Bombay landmarks.



*Bir Baba Hindu*: Indian yoga instructor Gundhi leads a session for Fadil and his mafia in Turkey, continuing the spoof on the commodification of so-called Eastern wisdom and techniques of stress management.



interview, openly spoke about the protests, went on to remove his outer shirt to display a t-shirt with penguins, and declared,

“I know that you are a democratic channel, so I wore this special t-shirt for you! Thank you for refreshing us on those hot days with penguins” (Özdemir 2013).

As Arzu Özturkmen has argued, contexts of censorship in Turkey have engendered such strategies of creative subversion through performance and storytelling by protestors and activists. It is difficult to characterize *Bir Baba Hindu*’s recourse to Bollywood idioms of song and dance, and its appearance as a nonsensical, superficial slapstick comedy, as *primarily* a strategy of subverting political censorship. Yet, this “silly” veneer nonetheless belies the film’s incisive critiques of corruption, through its running satire on the cozy relationships and between mafias and states, and on the commodification of yoga and “Eastern” wisdom (Hurtado 2016).

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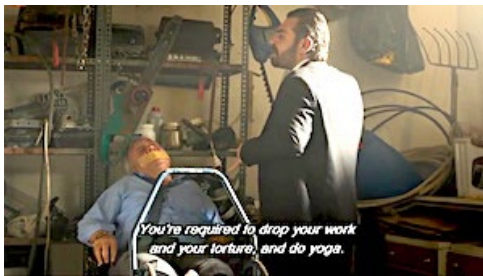
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# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



*Bir Baba Hindu*: A loudspeaker announcement summons all members of the mafia to a yoga session. The humorous instance of gangsters who destress through yoga spoofs the globalization and commodification of stress management techniques, as a balm applied to an otherwise unchanged lifestyle that underlies stress in the first place

As a comedic spin on the gangster genre, well established in both Hollywood and Bollywood contexts, *Bir Baba Hindu* lampoons the hierarchical, power-hungry structure of mobs; the blurred boundaries between mafias and political regimes, shown to be a cross-cultural phenomenon; and the absurdity of turning to yoga and other commodified forms of Eastern wisdom within a globalized, elitist industry of self-improvement, by which those who wield power can exorcise responsibility for any violence they inflict. Early in the film, for example, we see Fadil insisting that his fellow gangsters join him in breathing exercises, as a way of de-stressing and “purifying the air” in the aftermath of violent shootouts. Styled with a toothbrush mustache, bowler hat, and suit jacket, *Bir Baba Hindu*’s mobster-protagonist Fadil simultaneously invokes legendary comic actor Charlie Chaplin, Chaplin’s own mockery of Hitler, as well as the similarly-styled tramp characters of Hindi film actor Raj Kapoor, whose 1951 film *Awara* was so popular in Turkey that it went on to spur a mini-industry of Turkish remakes over subsequent decades (Taymoorzadeh 2018).

The film’s respective titles in Turkish and English point to an inscription of in-jokes and references that escape translation, as well as the film’s critical comedic emphasis upon the frequently-shared affinities between mafiosos and gurus, in their operations as greedy, power-hungry con artists. The latter is indicated by the official English title, *A Mobster Guru*, in light of the untranslatability of the referent for the Turkish title, derived from *bir baba hindi* (“big fat turkey”), a phrase that is also a stadium chant for the popular Istanbul club soccer team Fenerbahçe, whose home lies on Asian side of the Bosphorus and whose self-declared fans have included conservative Turkish prime-minister-turned-president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (“Bir Baba” 2016; Wood 2017). The Turkish title thus plays upon a “big fat turkey” becoming “an Indian Godfather” or, as the English suggests, “a mobster guru,” charting in its arc a generalized caricature of power-hungriness that peddles piety and spiritual wisdom for self-serving ends.



*Bir Baba Hindu*: Fadil sports a toothbrush mustache and bowler hat, reminiscent of both Charlie Chaplin and Raj Kapoor



As Fadil looks for Gundhi in India, he is yet to discover her own mafia connections. The latter emerges as a comedic twist that humorously emphasizes the alliance between powerful politicians and mafias as a familiar, transnational phenomenon.

While the mobster Fadil is drawn to his Indian love interest Gundhi’s yoga practice and aura of spiritual serenity, when she is suddenly kidnapped and whisked away to Bombay, Fadil chases her only to discover that she is the daughter of none other than Jagadamba, a fearsome, silent mafiosa who speaks only through movements of her eyes. Just as Fadil has been betrothed to the daughter of a Turkish minister, Gundhi, he finds out, has been betrothed to Sharu, the Indian prime minister’s son. The satirical narrative thread around the figure of “a mobster guru” / “big fat turkey” thus thickens, through the climatic revelation of this parallel as a shared, cross-cultural phenomenon: both Fadil and

Gundhi are children of mafiosos, and the gang leaders' intimate relationships with their respective governments are cemented through dynastic, matrimonial alliances. Through a series of absurd antics, songs, and dances – including numbers featuring lyrics such as “Don’t Touch My Cow” and “Dalai Lama Dance,” the film culminates in a wedding scene, as the two heirs to their respective mafias choose love over political clout and wealth, winning their respective families’ blessings. The closing moments of the film are humorously open-ended, suggesting that the slighted Turkish minister, to whose daughter Fadil was betrothed, has his own plans for the groom – perhaps leaving the door open for a sequel.



*Bir Baba Hindu*: Fadil coaxes his mafiosa mother-in-law-to-be to also do the “Dalai Lama dance,” in a self-consciously ridiculous mishmash of generic clichés about India, as Eastern spirituality (Dalai Lama, yoga, etc) meets Bollywood song-dance sequences.



Fadil and Gundhi's open-ended post-wedding happily-ever-after leaves open the possibility for a sequel, with the revelation that Fadil is not off the hook after slighting the Turkish politician to whose daughter Fadil was earlier betrothed.



*Gahim Fel Hend*: The film's chain of events is set off by the Egyptian ambassador's kidnapping in India, establishing the film's genre proclivities towards high action.

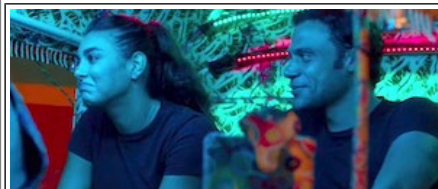
*Gahim Fel Hend*, which went on to become a blockbuster upon its summer Eid release among Egyptian and other Arab-speaking audiences, is similarly witty through punchy dialogues that are folded into a slapstick comedy of errors, when a band (quite literally) of Egyptians finds themselves in India (“Hell in India” 2016). A bureaucratic mix-up mistakenly dispatches a quintet of musicians in the military band, to assist special forces agent Adam Sabry in a mission to procure the release of the Egyptian ambassador to India, who has been kidnapped and held hostage. The film lampoons a dysfunctional, contemporaneous Egyptian state that is plagued by inefficient bureaucracy and egregious information leaks (Hessler 2017). In addition, *Gahim Fel Hend* features an extended love story between the effeminate tuba player Sana and a gorilla, in an exaggeratedly queer romance that mocks Egyptian masculinity as well as the Egyptian state's contemporaneous crackdowns on gays (Bennet et al, 2015). It is this subtext that animates the arbitrariness with which Sana decides, for example, that the gorilla is a woman, and that as such, their romance is permissible.



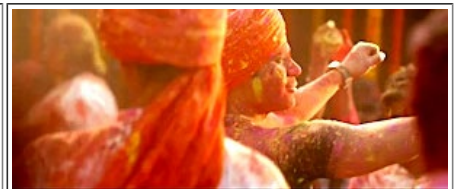
*Gahim Fel Hend*: The Egyptian military band rehearses, unaware of the mix-up that has happened. The audience, however, is cued into the mix-up.



Special agent Adam Sabry comes to realize the mix-up mid-mission, spoofing the ineptness of the Egyptian government's bureaucracy.



Pictured in a colorful rickshaw driven by an



... more conspicuous nor forgetful of the



undercover Egyptian whose alias is taken from Hindi megastar Shah Rukh Khan, special agent Adam Sabry has quickly fallen for his colleague Dina. The character Shah Rukh Khan also spoofs the contemporaneous political issue of notorious intelligence leaks, as the “undercover” Shah Rukh Khan could neither be ...	need for discretion, as he loudly speaks Arabic and blows his cover repeatedly. Special agent Adam Sabry blends into a colorful scene of Holi, while hit song “Barsa Re” from 2007 Bollywood film <i>Guru</i> plays. The Holi sequence is a longstanding staple of several popular Indian films
	
The budding romance between Sana and Hala references the 1997 Hollywood film <i>Titanic</i> , in a series of jokes that assume an intended audience's familiarity with Hollywood, Bollywood, as well as popular Egyptian films.	A running joke repeatedly references the famous father of the character Adam Sabry, breaking the fourth wall in terms of referring to the intended (Egyptian cinemagoing) audience's recognition that Mohamed Imam is the son of renowned comic film actor Adel Imam.



Love is in the air, between tuba player Sana and a gorilla whom he names Hala. This romance parallels others that occur in the film, which initially seem ludicrous.

As in *Bir Baba Hindu*, much of *Gahim Fel Hend* was shot on location in collaboration with Indian cast and crew, and the mise-en-scène is similarly chockful of visual clichés of both Bollywood and India: colorful song-dance sequences (including, in the case of *Gahim Fel Hend*, an iconic, Bollywood-staple song sequence that takes place during Holi, the festival of colors); cacophonous traffic; ubiquitous auto rickshaws, cows, and jungle animals; and turban-clad and god-men galore. *Gahim Fel Hend* is also replete with self-referential in-jokes about Egyptian stereotypes and cinema, peppered with Hollywood references to *King Kong*, *Godzilla*, and *Titanic*. Muhammad Emam, son of legendary Egyptian comic actor Adel Imam, stars in *Gahim Fel Hend* as special forces agent Adam Sabry, and several playful dialogues thus brim with self-referentiality in ongoing, seemingly random remarks about the special agent's famous father.

Across three romances between tuba player Sana and the gorilla he names Hala; the band leader Shamel and Soothy, an Indian woman whom he meets and marries shortly upon landing; and Adam's instant crush on Dina (Yasmin Sabry), a skilled agent who joins the mission, the film caricatures and pokes fun at the Egyptian characters' masculinity: as insecure beneath a giveaway façade of self-



Shamel finds himself marrying Soothy shortly after arriving in India. This romance parallels others that occur in the film, which initially seem ludicrous. Ultimately, the comedy is self-directed, as the butt of the humor surrounding these trysts is that of Egyptian masculinity.



The army band in *Gahim Fel Hend* invokes the Egyptian police band from Alexandria in *The Band's Visit*.



Palestinian actor Saleh Bakri plays the young, handsome Khaled. His father – like the famous actor-father of Mohamed Imam, who plays attractive special agent Adam Sabry in *Gahim Fel Hend* – is also a well-known actor.



The two main characters' love interest becomes

assuredness, reluctant to accept women's help and expertise, and prone to falling in love far too easily and quickly. The most ardent love affair in the film, however, is that of Egyptian cinemagoers' love of Bollywood films. *Gahim Fel Hend* culminates in an extended, visually spectacular song-dance medley that fuses Egyptian and Indian pop music, dance styles, costumes, and full cast of characters. Having woven in and out of stereotypes of India that are so bizarre as to become difficult to take seriously, including a scene reminiscent of an *Indiana Jones* film, in which a village of painted Indian cannibals gleefully attempt to cook two of the Egyptian band members, *Gahim Fel Hend* plays upon – and exaggerates, to the point of extreme ludicrousness – the tendency to denigrate Bollywood films for their perceived, stereotypical silliness, whose cinematic pleasures are, in the end, ardently shared and loved, as grounds for coming together across language, geography, and ethnicity (Armbrust 2008).

## The bands' (titular) visits

The cross-cultural encounter staged within *Gahim Fel Hend* pays homage to a much longer history of Indian films' familiarity and intelligibility among fans of popular Egyptian cinema, within and beyond Egypt (Armbrust 2008). The context of this familiarity marks out a particularly crucial point of distinction from an otherwise unmistakable set of resonances between plot elements of *Gahim Fel Hend* and Eran Kolorin's 2007 Israeli film *The Band's Visit*. Premiering at Cannes, *The Band's Visit* enjoyed critical acclaim at several festivals, and it also later morphed into an award-winning Broadway musical (Stanford 2018). The film was controversial, however, for depicting a sexual relationship between Egyptian and Israeli characters (Peri 2007). It was not publicly screened in Egypt and the UAE, as doing so would have been perceived as tantamount to a normalization of relations with Israel, and thereby courted public outcry (Peri 2007).

Parallels between the respective storylines of *Gahim Fel Hend* and *The Band's Visit* are patently obvious. The bureaucratic mix-up by which former's military band quintet ends up in India, mirrors the mispronunciation that precipitates the latter's eponymous Egyptian police band's visit to a sleepy Israeli town in the Negev Desert. The flirtatious, debonair Khaled of *The Band's Visit* is played by well-known Palestinian actor Salah Bakri, whose father Mohammad Bakri is also a well-known actor. As mentioned earlier, *Gahim Fel Hend*'s special agent Adam Sabry is played by Muhammad Emam, whose similarly famous father, actor Adel Emam, is repeatedly referenced as a running joke. Adam Sabry flirts relentlessly with his fellow agent Dina, played by actress Yasmin Sabry. Dina is also the name of the seductive female protagonist of *The Band's Visit*, to whom both the older Tewfiq and the younger Khaled are drawn. Just as the unexpected cross-cultural encounters in both films are set in motion by a mix-up, so, too, are the concluding moments comprised of a musical performance within the respective films.

Yet, the films are marked by starkly divergent aesthetic modes and exhibition histories. *Gahim Fel Hend* appears to be a nonsensical, brashly comedic, commercial entertainer, even though it engages profoundly concrete political realities. While it was a huge summer box office hit in Egypt, where it had broken box office records in four days, and also screened in the UAE, it was hardly screened, much less solicitous of any critical response, outside of this regional circuit ("Eid Film," 2016; Y, 2016). Widely characterized as a black comedy-drama, *The Band's Visit*, on the other hand, garnered enormous critical acclaim at festivals worldwide, with the notable exception of Egyptian and Emirati contexts, where its public screening was banned (Stanford 2018; Peri 2007).

Several critics saw *The Band's Visit* as a deft response to real-world political

Dina, a single Israeli woman. In *Gahim Fel Hend*, too, main character Adam Sabry's love interest is named Dina.

issues, even though the film is centrally propelled by the fantasy of their being held in abeyance (Kershner 2017). In *The Band's Visit*, political tensions slacken through an unlikely cross-border encounter, such that citizens of two officially hostile neighboring states enjoy a tender, momentary tryst in one another's company. The saturated color palette of *Gahim Fel Hend*'s mise-en-scène, fast-paced action and dialogue, bizarre twists and turns in the plot, highly caricatured characters, and upbeat song-dance finale, all stand out in stark contrast to *The Band's Visit*'s intentionally drab mise-en-scène of a desert town, slow pacing, plodding (largely English-language) dialogue, realist characters, natural acting styles, and plaintive musical finale.



Tewfiq is shown to sing plaintively in the concluding musical sequence of *The Band's Visit*. This concluding musical sequence is markedly different from that of *Gahim Fel Hend*, with the latter being far more upbeat



The spectacular Indo-Egyptian song-dance finale in *Gahim Fel Hend* concludes the film, playing to an audience for whom popular Indian films are familiar and beloved.



In *The Band's Visit*, an Egyptian police band ends up in an Israeli town in the Negev desert due to a mix-up, akin to the fate of *Gahim Fel Hend*'s Egyptian army band that ends up in India.

If the endeavor of *Gahim Fel Hend* is that of a sly, tacit remaking of *The Band's Visit* that is politically correct – in the sense of a presumed appropriateness for enthusiasts of popular Egyptian cinema who, rather than international festival audiences, are inscribed as the addressees – then a citation of an important scene in *The Band's Visit* may constitute a titular, primary reference that emphasizes the ironic orientation of *Gahim Fel Hend*'s title and its related depictions of India. In a memorable, early scene of *The Band's Visit*, as the band members are left wondering in what kind of town they have ended up, Dina wryly answers that the place is “hell” itself. Throughout *The Band's Visit*, the small Israeli town unfolds as utterly barren – drab, depressing, and lonely, as the residents lack a sense of culture, connectedness, or community. In *Gahim Fel Hend* (“Hell in India”), the notion of India as a strange hell is largely a conceit, as an inside joke that is emphasized by the Egyptian characters’ (and the entire film’s) intimate embrace, through a cultural domain of music, dance, and cinema, of an “other” who was, from the very outset, anything but.

Indeed, as David Shasha points out, one of the most curious aspects of *The Band's Visit* is the manner in which the film explores and erodes the (expectations of) tension between Egyptian and Israeli characters. The common denominator, in the film, ends up being the primal, human longings to which the characters yield – hunger, thirst, companionship, sex – rather than any recognition and deconstruction of the *ideological* projects that engender the very binary of Israeli/Arab as necessarily opposite, in the first place. Given the preponderant naturalism of the film, in terms of cinematography, pacing, and acting styles, David Shasha locates *The Band's Visit*'s most significant missed opportunity in its naturalization of Israeli-ness and Arab-ness as mutually exclusive ethno-cultural entities, to be overcome only through the discovery of ethnicity-blind, primal human desires. As a symptom of the film's naturalization of this problematic cultural duality (i.e., that one is human above all, but that one notch down, one is *either* an Arab *or* an Israeli), David Shasha cites the film's consequent downplaying of figure of Arab Jew:

“[I]n the case of 'The Band's Visit' it is important to note that the surface humanism the film presents hides the possible presence of a shared cultural vocabulary between the Arabs and Israelis. Indeed, as





*Gahim Fel Hend*: Shamel responds to an Indian man's stereotypical head bobble with his own stereotypical Egyptian head and hand motions of a "mummy dance." This exchange, particularly, exhibits a self-awareness over the stereotypes with which cultural others are beheld.

is common in Israeli culture and its native self-perception, the idea that Jews might be Arabs is a highly contested idea that is left unexplored and unarticulated in the movie. It is simply taken for granted that the Egyptians and Israelis are two completely different groups with nothing but their generic humanity in common... In [an] important moment in the film that has been carefully noted by critics, Dina shares her childhood memory of watching the Egyptian films shown every Friday afternoon on Israeli TV. For Israeli Sephardim, the weekly screening of the old Egyptian movies was an event of great importance and Dina rightly brings this to Tewfiq's attention. But in sharing this information with him, we never get a sense of the relevance of the matter. We are not told whether Dina's family is Sephardic. The film has closed off any possibility of cultural symbiosis in order to reinforce its generic humanistic cast" (Shasha 2009).

In *Gahim Fel Hend*, while the band of Egyptians initially perceives India as a stereotypically hellish land of kidnappers, thugs, threatening jungle animals, cannibals, bobble-headed idiots, and overly spicy food, by the end of the film, they – alongside an intended audience of cinephiles who are privy to the film's tongue-in-cheek references to Egyptian, Bollywood, and Hollywood cinema – have not only had a déjà vu experience of falling in love, but also emerge all the wiser through a journey of self discovery – i.e., that most clichéd of narratives about traveling to India. But in this case, the journey is a metacinematic one, as the Egyptian film's detour through audiovisual idioms of Bollywood pays homage to the "unnaturalism" of silliness, slapstick, and satire, as robust, transnational modes of both cinematic pleasure and critique.

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



*Road to Kabul:* The friends ride in a colorful mini-lorry en route to Afghanistan. The mise-en-scène of the lorry, with the accompaniment of the upbeat Hindi song, strongly evokes a generically South Asian / Eastward geography.

## *Road to Kabul* and cinematic geographies of (im)possibility

In *Road to Kabul*, a lower budget production that was fully shot – Afghanistan scenes included – in various locations in Morocco, the mise-en-scène and soundtrack that animate an upbeat montage sequence of the fivesome's journey to Afghanistan, is curiously out-of-place. The song is sung by Ruhan Kapoor, the son of renowned Hindi film playback singer Mahendra Kapoor, and the Hindi lyrics' refrain implore fellow travelers, in the course of their journey together, to "Listen to what is being said by the language of the eyes / [for] As glances met one another, hearts themselves were won."



*Road to Kabul:* A montage sequence chronicling the eastward road trip includes an animated map, as the soundtrack of an upbeat Hindi song charts a generically Eastward journey.



The mini-lorry's turbaned driver further emphasizes a generically South Asian / Eastward geography.

While the lyrics are not translated, their paean to forms of embodied intelligibility, beyond words, aptly characterizes the attractions of sensory cinematic modes whose cross-cultural intelligibility are less dependent upon linguistic translation, and for which popular Indian films have been well known: e.g., body humor, action and fight scenes, and musical and dance sequences. As the Hindi song plays, the montage proceeds through shots of an animated map, live action vignettes, and, once the animated map indicates their arrival in Afghanistan, the live action mise-en-scène of a large, colorful truck in which the group joyfully rides, courtesy a kindly truck driver adorned with a turban.

In this manner, the marking of the group's journey to Afghanistan draws on an audiovisual repertoire inherited from Indian films, emphasizing the group's traversal of terrain that is generically Eastern. While the painted truck is no stranger to Afghanistan, especially in light of the cross-border traffic between Pakistan and Afghanistan, it remains such an iconic figure of South Asian – especially Pakistani – folk art practices, and the song is even more firmly anchored to Indian contexts through its Hindi lyrics as well as the singer's familial connections to the Hindi film industry.






The group of Moroccans is helped by a little orphan boy named Mehmet, whose Turkish name and costume reminiscent of Disney's

The generically Eastward geography that emerges through the mise-en-scène of the lorry and the song that plays over the montage sequence, continues through the character of little Mehmet, who is apparently an orphaned Afghan boy despite his Turkish name and accoutrements that may well have been a Halloween costume for a child wanting to dress up as Disney's Aladdin. The Moroccan protagonists come to quickly lament their decision to have journeyed to "this

Aladdin further marks a generically Eastern geography vis-à-vis Morocco.

shitty country” of Afghanistan, as they continue to suffer a host of dramatic, over-the-top setbacks – excruciatingly hot weather, theft of their vehicle and clothing, the rain of militants’ ruthless bullets and bombs, the dangers of land mines, and episodes of kidnapping, extrajudicial detention, and torture by Taliban-esque militants and the U.S. military alike.

	
Scenes of detention, torture, and interrogation by U.S. military and intelligence agents mark a moment in the film that is intensely dark and grave, in a departure from its frequently light-hearted or action-driven sequences.	The group's detention, torture, and interrogation by U.S. military and intelligence agents elicit the sympathies of audiences, who are fully aware of the group's innocence.
	
A U.S. soldier is with an Afghan woman with whom he has fallen in love. The film depicts a variety of civilian and militant Afghan characters.	A jihadi's strong French accent is unmistakable, disrupting the Islamophobic stereotype of the Islamist terrorist whose violent tendencies stem from an inherent, antiquated religion that is insufficiently modern.



Hmida is found at a “high” point of a newfound career in Afghanistan. Within the genre of the stoner comedy, Amsterdam is deconstructed as the cannabis-friendly holy grail of the journey.



*Road to Kabul:* An epilogue notes that Hmida comes back to Morocco only to soon return to his newfound (other) home in Afghanistan. Thus, the journey not only produces a longing for home, but also emphasizes that the challenges of living in Morocco are yet to be resolved – such that Hmida ends up returning to Afghanistan, where he had found both employment and a sense of

Yet, even as the relatively low-budget film was not shot in any significant collaboration with Afghan cast and crew, the film continually retains in its frame – and humor – the political contexts of the wars in Afghanistan, and a depiction of the dynamic, diverse nature of the country's people. They are helped not only by the little Mehmet, but also by an Afghan woman with whom an U.S. soldier has fallen in love, and by whom the soldier is convinced to help the group after initially double-crossing them.

Of the two most fearsome Taliban-esque militants whom they encounter, one has a hilariously thick French accent that the Moroccan characters are able to immediately place. The humorous caricature calls attention to the Islamophobic tendency to characterize Islamist militancy as a deeply-ingrained, premodern hangover that prevents its adherents from becoming appropriately modern and secular. Rather, as the jihadi's strong French accent suggests, such militancy is entirely beholden to contemporary contexts and inextricable from Islamophobia in the West. Additionally, the film shows little difference between the militants' rigid interpretations of Islamic sharia law and the sham “trials” and extrajudicial punishments meted out by U.S. forces.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the film's conclusion and epilogue together emphasize the extent to which Hmida finds and makes himself at home in Afghanistan, finding meaningful work as none other than a professor of cannabis! This twist at the end is motivated by, and certainly apropos of, the genre of the stoner comedy. The group happens to catch and follow a strong whiff of cannabis and, to their utter joy, they find Hmida not merely safe, but in fact quite content and happy among fellow cannabis enthusiasts and producers in Afghanistan.

The outcome of their search deconstructs the initial idealization of the Netherlands as the destination of choice for the young, unemployed stoners, as



community.

the epilogue gestures toward the interrelated contexts of Islamophobia, the U.S.-led war on terror, and global economic inequality, by which the conflict in Afghanistan both hits closer to home (e.g., Morocco) and, as a result, Afghanistan emerges as an alternative home for the Moroccan characters. The epilogue glosses each of the characters' lives after the trip: for example, Mbarek still remains on the run from international police agents for his hacking activities; Ouchen wraps up his other scams in Morocco and starts an NGO that aids refugees; and while Hmida returns to Morocco and tries to find employment, he eventually returns to Afghanistan; his mother, the epilogue adds, follows suit, as she, too, returns to Afghanistan in an endeavor to track him down yet again.

## Open-ended provocations



*Gahim Fel Hend*: Upon seeing so many Indians, Shamel concludes that he must have landed in Dubai. The sequence comedically calls attention to the well-known status of South Asians (and other migrants) in Dubai, who comprise the non-citizen workforce and the majority of the population.

In a memorable scene of *Gahim Fel Hend*, the conductor Shamel is forced to parachute out of a plane, and he lands right in the midst of bustling Bombay traffic. He looks around with confusion, wondering where he is and why there are so many Indians around, before knowingly exclaiming, “Dubai!” A reference to the huge numbers of South Asians who comprise a significant part of the noncitizen workforce in the Gulf, the scene raises crucial questions about all three films' recourse to ethnic stereotypes – even if, arguably, these ethnic stereotypes are exaggerated to such an extent that they become undone.

In his response the trailer of *Gahim Fel Hend*, V\_nesh, an Indian YouTube personality whose reaction videos have garnered him thousands of followers, enthusiastically predicts, as per the trailer, that film that will be rife with high comedy and action. He is particularly thrilled upon recognizing iconic Bombay landmarks, such as the Chhatrapati Shivaji railway station, commenting that he remains totally onboard with such love for the city of Bombay, to which he, too, is presumably an outsider. Without any other context, V\_nesh both recognizes the generic modes of the film (e.g., high action, high comedy) and reads – and applauds – the trailer as advertising a film that is very clearly an homage to Bollywood films.

The problem that remains, however, is that loving and consuming cultural objects (e.g., Bollywood films) and espousing racist attitudes toward the people with which they are associated, are hardly mutually exclusive. In 2015, while I was at the American University of Beirut, the theme for the annual Outdoors festival, a huge, annual springtime event organized by students, was *Namaste*. A celebration of Bollywood, yoga, and all *things* South Asian, the celebration's egregious exclusion remained that of South Asian bodies, in the wider sociopolitical context of South Asians' significant presence in Lebanon as sanitation, construction, and domestic workers, often laboring under highly exploitative conditions. The distinction between self-interested commodification, versus genuine cross-cultural engagement, is captured in a response to the *Namaste* edition of AUB Outdoors by Neil Singh, a South Asian doctor and activist who was in Lebanon at the time:

“An Australian eating bush-food does not return stolen land to aboriginal people. Americans listening to Jazz do not make good for slavery and mass incarceration. And a Lebanese student partying under the banner of “Namaste” does nothing for the Indian men in janitorial jumpsuits who pick up the discarded wrappers of products they cannot afford, [or for] the Indian women who hide their cancers under their aprons. What is the best way to honor an elephant? By sawing off its tusks and holding an ivory party? Or removing its shackles?” (Singh 2015).

Related debates challenge the efficacy of humor that resorts to ethnic stereotypes, such as that which concerns *The Simpsons* character Apu and emerged as the object of Hari Kondabolu's recent, scathing documentary *The Problem With Apu*.



*The Problem with Apu:* Hari Kondabolu's documentary lambastes *The Simpsons'* stereotypical portrayal of Apu, igniting a productive conversation over humor that takes recourse to ethnic stereotypes.

While some, South Asian-Americans included, have defended Apu as a loveable, obvious caricature among all the other caricatures who comprise the show, Kondabolu has slammed *The Simpsons* for carrying forward yet another iteration of a deplorably racist, U.S. legacy of minstrelsy, not merely in its stereotypical portrayal of a convenience-store-owning, Indian-immigrant character, but particularly, Kondabolu argues, in Apu's voicing by a white American for the amusement of, primarily, other white Americans (Biswas 2018; Heritage 2018).

In the wake of Kondabolu's documentary, a productive conversation has emerged around, among other things, how *The Simpsons* might best address the problems that have been pointed out. Suggestions have included the immediate removal of Apu; the addition of other, significant, varied South Asian characters as an antidote to the stereotypes that Apu reinforces; or the casting of a South Asian or South Asian-American replacement voice actor for Apu (Heritage 2018). The debate – and solutions offered – point to questions that must be centered, à la Caglayan's discussion of laughter, ethics, and political correctness through a distinction between laughing *with*, versus laughing *at*, characters and films, particularly when they occupy a position that is, and are consequently beheld by audiences as, systematically inferior.

To this end, probing material and ideological structures of power that produce such systematic marginality in specific locations is key: the class position of many South Asian emigres to the Lebanon and Gulf, for example, is very different from that of the highly-educated and well-heeled professionals who comprise a significant portion of the South Asian community in the United States. In this vein, situating a figure like the Apu within a racist genealogy of minstrelsy is helpful, but only with a simultaneous acknowledgement of the shared challenges faced by people of color *and* of the histories of chattel slavery that have disproportionately marginalized – and continue to affect – African-American communities, specifically, in the United States.

By curating this package of popular comedies in Arabic and in Turkish for the Virginia Film Festival premiere in Charlottesville, I insisted in my introductory remarks that the films were not merely about places “over there,” but also about the specificity of Charlottesville itself, whose ostensible homogeneity belies a multilingual, multi-ethnic – albeit highly stratified – city that is home to several families from Central Asia and the Middle East, among other places. Many of these residents have been officially resettled as refugees through the International Rescue Committee, and in several cases, their displacement has occurred as a direct consequence of catastrophic wars in which the United States – as well as numerous public and private defense and military operations that thrive along a corridor between Charlottesville and Washington D.C. – have played no small part.

Charlottesville itself, by the 2018 film festival, had become additionally recognizable as “#Charlottesville,” in the wake of the violent white supremacist “Unite the Right” rally of August 11 and 12, 2017. For decades, long before the abhorrent rally, the city and university had been no strangers to racialized violence, and this has acutely informed the stakes of ongoing conversations over race, representation, and systemic violence and inequality. The August 2017 white supremacist rally itself was sparked by the city's long-overdue vote in favor of removing confederate monuments in two downtown public parks, owed to the tremendous organizing efforts of anti-racist, progressive activists (Benjamin Wallace-Wells, 2017; Diggs, 2019).

Between the “both-sides”-ism proclaimed by Donald Trump, and the fact that the “Unite the Right” torchbearers Richard Spencer and Jason Kessler had earned Bachelor of Arts degrees from the University of Virginia in history and music, and in psychology, respectively, some of the most compelling reflections over #Charlottesville emphasized the limits of liberal institutions and ideals (Phillips, 2016). These reflections noted the contemporary, bureaucratic university’s hampered ability to take moral positions – e.g., unequivocally against white supremacy in this case – in the name of diversity of thought; or, the moral abdication entailed in giving hateful ideologies platforms – quite literally, for Confederate monuments – in the name of free speech (Wellmon, 2017). Progressive, anti-racist activists have responded accordingly to these challenges, in such orchestrated efforts as their refusal to give press interviews to any sources that perpetuate a false moral equivalence between “both sides” by also providing a platform for white supremacists (Campbell 2018).

If the aftermath of #Charlottesville (once again) shored up the limits of liberal ideals like free speech, a university education, and diversity *in the absence of a reckoning with structures of power*, then a crucial aim of curating the *LOL* series for both Yale University and the University of Virginia’s Virginia Film Festival was to invite audiences to contemplate the films’ undoing of widespread assumptions about the Middle East and its cinemas, on the one hand; and the films’ own politically incorrect mobilizations of ethnic stereotypes of an Eastern “other” – even if self-consciously so – on the other hand.

In this way, Caglayan’s distinction between *laughing with* and *laughing at* might be reformulated as a question posed to audiences in the introductory remarks: what is the relationship between the viewer and the object of a joke? As a tenet of liberalism, free speech *alone*, as the violent display of white supremacy in #Charlottesville painfully and clearly demonstrated, cannot suffice as an ethnical horizon. This, precisely, is the conclusion of Talal Asad’s incisive reading of the erstwhile, notorious, so-called “Rushdie affair.” Asad’s piece initially examines the manner in which the international media coverage of the controversy over novelist Salman Rushdie’s 1988 book *The Satanic Verses* was framed as an ideological battle between censorious Islamist extremists and permissive free speech advocates.

Pointedly, Asad argues that upholding free speech as an end in itself elides the crucial question of whether the playing field is level. In the case of *The Satanic Verses*, Asad notes that Rushdie was by then renowned in the United Kingdom, and his English-language novel principally lampooned, in Asad’s reading, a minority British community (Muslims, Asians) who had recently borne the brunt of considerable racism and violence under the Thatcherite government. While Asad’s argument about the novel’s primary audience and primary object of critique is debatable (Mufti, 1991), his leading question remains prescient: were figures being satirized by the novel associated with a community in a position of power vis-à-vis the novel’s readership(s) such that they could adequately respond to such a satirical portrayal, at the time and place(s) in which *The Satanic Verses* was published and being circulated?

Since the *LOL* series occurred as an academic event at Yale University and at the University of Virginia’s Virginia Film Festival, respectively, the audience was, at least to some degree, predisposed to an intellectual engagement with these films that, once again, were primarily oriented in their production towards their respective national and regional box offices, rather than an international festival circuit. Given the academic screening contexts, it was less likely – partly through the insistence of the introductory remarks and printed notes – that the films would be consumed as “*just* a series of nonsense jokes,” to use Rezqi’s words. Multiple audience members at Yale University and at the Virginia Film Festival verbally expressed their gratitude for the introductory remarks and short-form curatorial notes, noting that the commentary was helpful in filling in some of the films’ contexts and emphasizing crucial inside jokes (even, for example, such



things as the continuous, self-referential remarks about the character Adam Sabry's famous father in *Gahim Fel Hend*) that would have otherwise gone completely over their heads.

At least five of my own students who voluntarily attended the Virginia Film Festival screening of *Gahim Fel Hend* shared the experience of watching the film with a group of friends that included individuals who were drawn to the event because of having grown up with either commercial Indian films or commercial Egyptian films. They all noticed that fans of popular Indian cinema and native speakers of Arabic who were familiar with Egyptian cinema, respectively, laughed loudly in moments that were not as amusing to the rest of the audience. A handful of others – student and non-student audience members alike – expressed difficulties in getting past the more outlandish plot elements of the three films. Without exception, however, even among a few audience members who expressed lukewarm reactions to the films' entertainment value, audience members who shared their responses emphasized their appreciation for the insights of the introductory remarks and printed notes in conjunction with the screenings, expressing gratitude for the opportunity to access, view, and contemplate such unique comedic, commercial non-Euro-American films.

*Road to Kabul*, *Bir Baba Hindu*, and *Gahim Fel Hend* all crucially engage in powerfully self-directed critiques of their own specific national contexts. *Road to Kabul* certainly portrays a variety of Afghan – as well as Moroccan and U.S. – characters; *Bir Baba Hindu* and *Gahim Fel Hend* engage Indian locations, cast, and crew in their respective productions; and all three films offer visions of collaboration across national and ethnic boundaries. In each case, a journey produces the recognition of constraints (e.g., unemployment, mafia politics, bureaucracy) that in turn occasion an encounter with an other – in terms of both ethnicity and geography – who, by the end of the journey, is recognized as intimate and familiar, in a new, shared communal space of belonging, through cinema (Ravi, 2016). To claim this as a possibility – however debatable, however limited – constitutes the open-ended provocation upon which the *LOL* package was energetically staked.

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## Notes

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1. I use the term Bollywood in this essay while referring to a set of contemporary films and the contexts of a contemporary Indian media industry. For a historical and theoretical discussion of the term “Bollywood,” see Ashish Rajadhyaksha’s 2003 article “The Bollywoodization of Indian Cinema” as well as Rajadhyaksha’s 2009 monograph *Indian Cinema in the Time of Celluloid*. [[return to page 1](#)]

2. I am reminded of a conversation during the Middle East Caucus’s meeting at the 2017 Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference in Chicago. I was a caucus co-chair at the time, and while preparing panel and workshop submissions in the preceding months, news of Abbas Kiarostami’s death in July 2016 had sparked widespread interest, among caucus members, in a retrospective panel dedicated to Kiarostami’s life and work. The official panel submission by the Middle East Caucus lined up a set of compelling papers in an eloquent proposal that was vetted by several pairs of eyes. To the shock of many, considering both the quality of the panel and its timeliness following Kiarostami’s death, the panel was rejected. At the same time, the final conference program included an unprecedented number of Middle-East-related panels about the war in Syria and the July 2016 coup in Turkey. The frustration, expressed by a number of caucus members, was not that the latter was not important, but rather, a lingering question: “Why is the Middle East a region that seems to be of interest and relevance predominantly through the lens of violence and crisis?”

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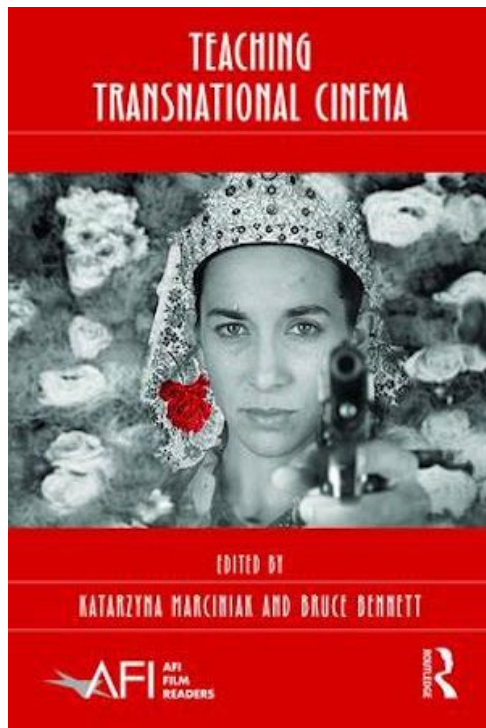
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In *Teaching Transnational Cinema: Politics and Pedagogy* editors Katarzyna Marciniak and Bruce Bennett aim to bridge the divide between cinema studies and film pedagogy.

## Pedagogy as weapon

by [Shakti Jaising](#)

Katarzyna Marciniak and Bruce Bennett, Eds. *Teaching Transnational Cinema: Politics and Pedagogy*. AFI Film Readers Series. London and New York: Routledge, 2016. \$39. 312 pg.

The AFI Film Reader, *Teaching Transnational Cinema* is a valuable contribution to film studies and pedagogy — not just because it supports film professors' work in the classroom, but also because, in doing so, it questions the elitist, institutionalized divide between teaching and specialized research and between the classroom and the world.

Collectively, the essays included in this volume narrow the gap between film theory/philosophy and pedagogy, and also push back against what Chandra Mohanty calls an “empty pluralism” (17), or what Guillermo Gomez-Pena labels “the new corporate humanism” (20) that has played an enabling role in the transformation of “partially state-funded institutions ... into profit-making corporate businesses” within a neoliberal world order (18). As Aga Skrodzka points out in her essay included in the volume,

“Teaching courses within the framework of transnational studies is quickly being coopted by many American universities as part of the institutional mission of fostering ‘global citizenship’ in order to better prepare young Americans to compete for jobs as leaders in a worldwide marketplace as well as members of the ‘global civil society.’” (236-237)

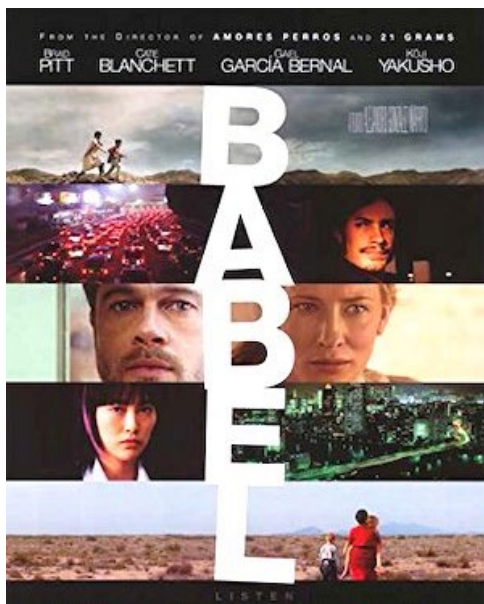
To challenge this cooptation by the neoliberal university, editors Katarzyna Marciniak and Bruce Bennett — drawing on Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino — conceive of the teaching of transnational cinema (like Third Cinema) as a potential ideological “weapon,” especially “in the face of the ‘post-ideological’ turn in many arts, humanities, and social science disciplines” (18). The book therefore aims to be “not so much a manual for teaching transnational cinema on university courses as ... a set of reflections upon broader questions of pedagogy, communication and cultural criticism in which teaching, in its widest sense, is understood to be an intrinsic component of academic research” (30) and a vital means of activating thought and political engagement.

The volume consists, in addition to the editors' introduction and closing interview with Rey Chow, of fifteen essays — some of which are short position pieces — by international film scholars who teach in a variety of contexts, from Europe and America to Egypt, Turkey, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

The editors point out, “Since the early 1990s the concept of transnationalism has gained currency across disciplinary boundaries.” With increased economic globalization, cross-border migration, and the emergence of “a rich body of films with complex production histories,” “the rubric of transnational cinema galvanized film and media studies, drawing our attention to a complex field of what Hamid Naficy has called diasporic and ‘accented’ filmmaking, but also challenging us to think about cinema beyond the restrictive scope of the nation



The recurring figure of the foreigner in Tom McCarthy's *The Visitor* brings to the fore some of the key challenges of teaching transnational cinema.



Alejandro Inarritu's *Babel* compels us to think about the relationship between formal experimentation and political commentary.

and to re-engage with the politics of cinema as a complex global or transcultural phenomenon" (11). Mette Hjort notes in her essay that transnationalism even found "expression in revisionist accounts of early cinema, with attention being drawn to filmmakers' border-crossing mobility from the very beginning of film history, and to their designs, all along, on audiences situated well beyond a given national space" (155). Bruce Bennett, therefore, in the opening essay of Part 1, describes trans-nationalism as a critical framework that "brings the historical conditions of the medium to the surface" (47).

Marciniak and Bennett begin the book with *The Visitor* (Tom McCarthy 2007) — a film about the incarceration of a Syrian immigrant by U.S. authorities that is especially resonant within the contemporary moment of heightened xenophobia and nativism. The editors admit that it "is not an obvious example of transnational cinema" because "writer/director McCarthy is not a diasporic or 'accented' filmmaker, and the film is solely US-produced" (5)." The editors here imply that the category of transnational cinema is used typically to refer to films produced through trans-national funding and collaboration, or to those works made by filmmakers with a history of cross-cultural migration. However, what interests the editors in *The Visitor* is the recurring figure of the foreigner and the often uncomfortable questions this figure raises about cinematic encounters with foreignness.

In *The Visitor* a bland, white American professor is transformed by his attempts to defend an artistically oriented Syrian immigrant and his Senegalese girlfriend. Whereas the immigrants are eventually deported, the white protagonist becomes a more lively, engaged, and artistic person through his contact with them. Marciniak and Bennett argue that the film exemplifies how foreigners are essentially instrumentalized, or constructed primarily as bearers of "pedagogical use-value" (5) for native residents, who are invited to "move into a space of depoliticized affect" (21) by expressing an empathy for immigrants that masks political dynamics and hierarchies. *The Visitor* thus exemplifies the challenges of teaching transnational cinema and raises many questions including what it means to "avoid 'consumerist' emotionality" (21) and prompt reflection in the classroom on the political implications of this emotionality.

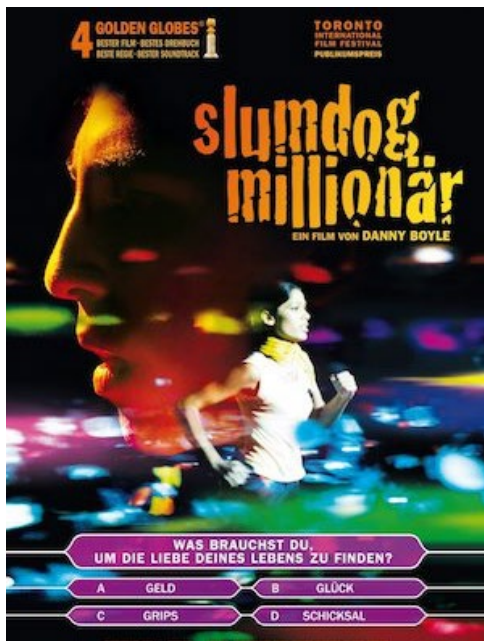
The majority of essays included in the volume invoke a pedagogy premised on enhancing close reading skills so as to attune students to films' contradictions. In his essay Alex Lykidis describes teaching on contemporary "global Hollywood" films like *Children of Men* (2006) that align the viewer "with the actions of flawed white, bourgeois protagonists rather than the heroic struggles of immigrant



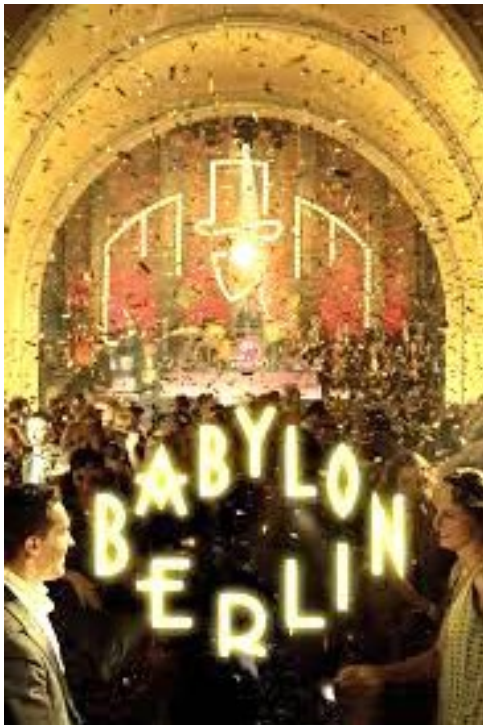
characters” (62). Students are thus trained to recognize, through close reading, how films like these might encourage, even if in contradictory ways, “the viewer’s disidentification with white male subjectivity and agency in favor of a radical dispersal of our attention towards the margins of society” (65). Similarly, Rachel Lewis describes how teaching close analysis of transnational lesbian cinema within women’s and gender studies classrooms enables students to appreciate the contradictory ways in which globally circulating “neoliberal ideologies mediate the expression of lesbian desire,” resulting at times in the reproduction of “xenophobic norms of sexual citizenship” and at other times in the critique of “the extent to which sexual citizenship for some is secured at the expense of undocumented and stateless populations” (127).

 <p>CLIVE OWEN JULIANNE MOORE MICHAEL CAINE <b>CHILDREN OF MEN</b></p>	 <p>audrey tautou chiwetel ejiofor sergi lopez <b>dirty pretty things</b> "FUELED BY GRIPPING SUSPENSE... IT SHAKES YOU!" — Rolling Stone FROM THE DIRECTOR OF THE GRIFTERS AND DANGEROUS LIAISONS MIRAMAX</p>
<p>“Global Hollywood” films like <i>Children of Men</i> introduce students to the complexities of audience alignment, and potential disidentification, with flawed, white protagonists.</p>	<p>Stephen Frears’ <i>Dirty Pretty Things</i> is only one example of how transnational cinema might facilitate student engagement with the social and subjective consequences of economic globalization.</p>

These essays that emphasize teaching students to grapple with a film’s political contradictions most resonated with my own classes on transnational cinema. In my experience, teaching films like *Dirty Pretty Things* (Stephen Frears 2002), *Babel* (Alejandro Gonzales Inarritu 2006), or *Slumdog Millionaire* (Danny Boyle/Lovleen Tandan 2008) — formally complex texts and powerful gateways into thinking about economic globalization, contemporary geopolitics, and the politics of transnational film production and reception — inevitably entails challenging students’ (and many academics’) expectation that the study of film and cultural production is primarily about style and technique, which are assumed to be distinct from politics. Transnational films, as the editors note in the introduction, often “necessitate a complex interdisciplinary discussion” that compels teachers to think carefully about “historical, cultural, social, and ideological contexts, and how and when to offer such contexts to our students” (14). I recognized in reading some of the volume’s essays, the labor-intensive, cross-disciplinary research that it takes to politically contextualize the above-mentioned films in the classroom. The challenge, however, lies in strategizing, as



The globally bestselling *Slumdog Millionaire* has been used widely in classrooms to spur conversation about the politics of trans-national film production and reception.



The globally circulating, spectacular, big-budget Netflix television series, *Babylon Berlin* prompts rethinking of traditional conceptions of transnational “cinema.”

Matthew Holtmeier and Chelsea Wessels point out, “how much context to offer students” (79) so that students are not passively receiving information from the teacher, in order to decode the perceived foreignness of the text, but rather are actively participating in producing an interpretation.

To counter the limits of this pedagogy, some of the volume’s essays pose alternatives. For instance, Mette Hjort describes a course taught in Hong Kong that aimed “to bring theory and practice together” by having students engage with short film production in diverse contexts — from Palestine to Uganda — in conjunction with “canonical classics of world cinema” (166), before collaborating in the production of vodcasts that were premiered transnationally through the Internet. Similarly, Lawrence Raw describes a pedagogy of “co-creation” between students and teachers practiced in a film classroom in Turkey (180). And Katarzyna Marciniak considers the possibility that “a virtual classroom is a potentially particularly productive site for studying transnational cinema” (275), even while recognizing that online classes might be especially amenable to the exploitation of academic labor, given that they allow “labor to be delivered remotely, without having to deal with the messiness of bodies and their affects in the classroom” (280).

Still other essays advocate for an approach that emphasizes the global political economy of film and media and its historical role in shaping interpretation. In his contribution to the volume Bhaskar Sarkar argues that “a pedagogy of transnational cinema cannot proceed without a pedagogy of the piratical” (192). This pedagogy, he suggests, needs to take into account the “pressure” piracy places on our understanding of transnational culture today — the ways in which “street-level piratical practices push us to look beyond the gleaming multiplexes and hi-def 4K imagination: what comes into view is a world teeming with all manner of media objects and survival tactics” (198). Meanwhile, Terri Ginsberg and Tania Kamal-Eldin describe their teaching experiences in Egypt and their attempts to challenge a depoliticized transnationalism that teaches “non-Western cinema cultures to Western students.” They insist instead on a “confrontational pedagogy” that helps students recognize their interpretations “as historically particular and socially enabled, [and hence] as available for debate and transformative interpretation” (261). This strategy of encouraging debate and confrontation counters what Marciniak describes as a “safe” pedagogy, in which faculty are asked to bear the burden of protecting students from potential “triggers” (273).

Finally, I was intrigued by Rey Chow’s suggestion in the volume’s coda that film be taught alongside television dramas playing on cable channels like HBO or web platforms like Netflix. Indeed, the high production values of serialized television dramas and the increased involvement in them of film directors and actors — most notably, perhaps, the internationally successful, Tom Tykwer-produced Netflix series, *Babylon Berlin* — supports Chow’s suggestion to think about transnational audio-visual culture beyond “cinema” (understood primarily as feature film production and theatrical exhibition). Such an approach, that involves rethinking our conception of “cinema,” might also help support the contributors’ efforts to challenge the compartmentalization of the academic study of film and its problematic disconnection from broader politics and everyday realities.

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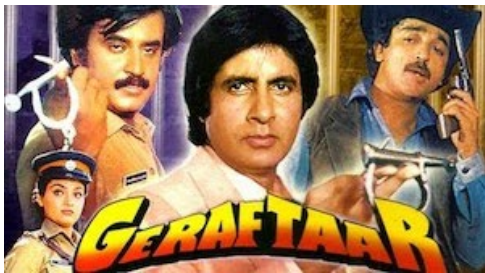




Amitabh Bachchan with Egyptian fans in front of the pyramids from his visit to Cairo in 1991.



Egyptian-Pakistani director Mohamed Khan (1942-2016).



Film poster for Prayag Raaj's *Geraftaar* (1985)

## Bachchan Superman — Hindi Cinema in Egypt, 1985-1991

by [Claire Cooley](#)

In 1988, superstar Amitabh Bachchan (b. 1942) made an appearance in an Egyptian commercial film *Dreams of Hind and Camelia*—potentially without his knowledge. One of Pakistani-Egyptian filmmaker Mohammed Khan's most popular films, *Dreams of Hind and Camelia* curiously includes several sequences of Prayag Raaj's 1985 Hindi film *Geraftaar* ("Arrested") in which Amitabh Bachchan co-stars. In keeping with his interest in portraying characters enjoying everyday life, Khan directs a scene in *Dreams of Hind and Camelia* in which best friends Hind and Camelia see *Geraftaar* in a theater. In fact, the depiction of cinema-going was one of Khan's trademarks. Yet *Dreams of Hind and Camelia* proves exceptional in the way it devotes an entire minute to *Geraftaar* and Amitabh Bachchan in particular.

*Dreams of Hind and Camelia* is an example of New Realist Egyptian cinema, a movement in the 1980s that sought to expose through cinema the detrimental effects of *al-infitāh* (Anwar Sadat's "Open-Door Policy") on Egyptian society. Through a quasi-documentary style, filmmakers narrated the bleak reality of middle and lower-income families struggling with unemployment, greed, and debt. Khan's decision to include a clip of *Geraftaar* and scenes of Bachchan in his film index the star's popularity in Egypt at the time. Bachchan's presence in an important film of Egyptian New Realism proves helpful for tracing how a globally circulating Hindi cinema addresses concerns and fills absences within an Egyptian society that is adjusting to changes associated with economic liberalization.

Bachchan's presence in *Dreams of Hind and Camelia* is part of a decades-long cinematic exchange between Egypt and India. Bachchan, whose fame has been virtually unmatched in the 90-year history of Bombay cinema, achieved superstar status in India with a series of films from the mid 1970s to 1980s that combined elements of melodrama, music, action, and romance. These components of Hindi cinema would later resonate deeply with Egyptian viewers; Bachchan skyrocketed into Egypt's cinema star constellation with films like *Geraftaar* and *Mard* (1985) that viewers saw in theaters or watched on videocassette in private and public spaces. Back in India, Bachchan's films from the late 1980s did not attract audiences like they had at the peak of his stardom, when he was known as the "Angry Young Man."<sup>[1]</sup> [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) But the later films still had enthusiastic fans in Egypt.

In subsequent decades, Bachchan, his films, and their soundtracks continued to reverberate in the Egyptian memory of 1980s cinema. In 2015, Bachchan returned to Egypt to attend the third annual "India by the Nile Festival," a week-long celebration of Indian culture and cinema. During the festival, Egyptian TV host Mona El Shazly dedicated an episode of her talk show to Amitabh Bachchan. In informal interviews included in the show, fans stopped on the streets of Cairo recounted memories of watching Bachchan's films in the '80s. In one conversation, a man fondly explained how he and his friends used to consume



Amitabh Bachchan at the third annual "India by the Nile" festival held in Cairo in 2016.



Film poster for Mohamed Khan's *Dreams of Hind and Camelia* (1989).



"I didn't expect anyone to know of me" says Bachchan in his 2015 interview with Mona El Shazly referring to his 1991 visit to Egypt. Yet Bachchan's success is largely dependent on transnational networks of distribution and the support of fans outside of India, which makes his claim untenable.

Bachchan films. Speaking in Egyptian Arabic, he said,

"Very few people had a video player. We used to listen to [Bachchan's films] in the café. Every Thursday we would get together there and stay up late and listen to Amitabh Bachchan's films."

This fan's use of the verb "to listen" rather than "to watch" indicates the favoring of sonic over visual elements in consuming Bachchan's films. His comments indicate a unique relation between Bachchan's stardom and sound and video technology in the 1980s. Through video tapes shown in various private and public spaces, viewers *listened* to Bachchan on weekend nights while socializing with friends and neighbors. Made increasingly available through the dissemination of video tape, the soundtracks of Hindi films filled spaces like cafes with catchy music and voices usually (but not always) translated by subtitles. Sound, in addition to providing a medium that expresses meaning through language, has "direct sensorial effects and affects, as with smells, tastes, and gestures... it is not an object but an event, not a coded representation but a medium, not a thought but a feeling."<sup>[2]</sup> Viewer interaction with Bachchan's and other Hindi films involved a particular affective, sensory, and social experience for them that currently prevailing notions of how cinema and stars are consumed do not adequately encapsulate.

In this article, I investigate Amitabh Bachchan's fame in Egypt 1980s and 1990s and connect that superstar's popularity to the parallel socio-economic effects of wider economic policies of the time, in both Egypt and India. Drawing on Russell Meeuf and Raphael Raphael's argument that stars' bodies provide sites for mediating class, national identity, race, gender, and sexuality,<sup>[3]</sup> I ask what Amitabh Bachchan, his voice, and the characters he portrayed embodied for Egyptian viewers/listeners and for Bachchan's female fans in particular. Taking as a point of departure the fan who remembers "listening" to Bachchan's films on video in the neighborhood space of the café, I propose a concept of "sonic stardom" to explore how sound provided a key vector in Bachchan's stardom in Egypt. In both India and Egypt, Bachchan's deep, posh baritone voice and memorable one-liners sonically enhanced his 'un-conventional' looks and proved integral to the megastar's persona. The songs in Bachchan's and other films were especially important to Egyptian viewers, because the domestic industry produced no musical films during that period. As his fans watched his films repeatedly and imitated his song and dance sequences, Bachchan, his voice, and signifiers of India permeated Egyptian cinematic imaginaries.

Beyond providing an example of the global flow of popular culture, Bachchan's sonic stardom in Egypt also points to the *dissonances* of cultural exchange. Despite his wide popularity, for example, Amitabh Bachchan claims not to have known about his fame in Egypt in the 1980s.<sup>[4]</sup> I interrogate the claim of ignorance by examining the ways in which his films traveled to and within Egypt, the spaces in which they were screened, and the media technologies with which they were associated. In addition to their exhibition in cheaper theaters, often in poorer neighborhoods, Bachchan's films circulated on videocassette. Given videocassettes' contemporaneous association with copyright infringement, I explore how this mobile medium had an ambivalent cultural status; as Michael Newman reminds us, a medium's cultural status shifts and depends on "ideas about value, authenticity, and legitimacy" at a particular time.<sup>[5]</sup> Even though Indian musical cinema is widely popular in Egypt among all segments of society, there is a prevailing association between Hindi cinema and "lower" classes.<sup>[6]</sup> With this in mind, I argue that what seems to be Bachchan's conjecture and



performative ignorance of Hindi cinema in Egypt is related to video's sometime low-brow status. I contextualize this 'ignorance' within the history of Indian-Egyptian cinematic exchange and film criticism.

On a wider scale, this essay aims to contribute to scholarly discussions concerned with re-writing Hollywood's dominance in film and global media studies.[7] Indian cinema's importance in Egypt has largely been overlooked by scholars and critics. Walter Armbrust describes this (in)visibility as the "the ubiquitous non-presence" of Indian cinema in Egypt, which he attributes to a power dynamic between national cinema and Hollywood and Europe—in addition to accusations that Hindi cinema is low-class. [8] In film scholarship, there is a tendency to focus on art-house films in studies of "world cinema," and comparative work that considers Egyptian cinema along an East-West axis has also precluded serious focus on Indian cinema's integral presence and impact in Egypt.

## Indian cinema in Egypt: dissonance of cultural exchange and the videocassette's ambivalent status



"Masterpieces from India," an article in Egyptian star magazine al-Kawakib that discusses aspects of the presence of Hindi films in Egypt, such as their distribution and the possibility that Hindi cinema stars will visit Cairo.

Amitabh Bachchan's popularity in Egypt is part of Indian cinema's decades-long affective presence in Egyptian films and viewers' imaginations in the complex history of interaction between the two. Indian cinema and related signifiers have had a presence in Egypt and its domestic cinema since the 1930s.[9] And yet Indian cinema's status in Egypt has largely depended on the Egyptian government's policies towards the local film industry in terms of support or funding and its protectionist or laissez-faire stance towards imports. It has also changed according to the socio-political context at the time—such as non-alignment under Nasser and Nehru in the 1950s and 1960s. An article in Egyptian star magazine *al-Kawakib* reflects official feelings towards Indian cinema at the time. The article notes enthusiastically how "the ties that bind Egypt and India are deep-rooted, marked by strong contacts in politics, commerce, and culture," and asserting the importance of cultural exchange between the two countries through Indian films.[10] An article in *The Times of India* in 1961, meanwhile, discusses the exciting possibility of a co-production between the Egyptian and Indian film industries.[11]

With Sadat's presidency and the implementation of his Open-Door Policy in the 1970s, official attitudes in Egypt towards Indian cinema shifted. Sadat's decision to open the economy set Egypt on a new ideological and political trajectory. In 1971, the Ministry of Culture passed regulations in order to protect the Egyptian film industry. In addition to requiring a certain amount of screen-time for domestic films, a ministerial decree imposed exhibition regulations that restricted and ultimately *banned* the showing of Indian films. Given their ubiquity and appeal to audiences, Indian films were considered a box-office threat.[12] During Hosni Mubarak's presidency, the state maintained Sadat-era policies exerting control over cultural production without actually devoting significant resources to promoting the domestic film industry. A 1983 ministerial decree establishing quotas that required the showing of Egyptian films during Muslim holidays was one of the only steps taken to directly Egyptian cinema.

In the 1970s and 1980s, musical films were largely absent from Egyptian theaters, despite the fact that they had historically been the biggest hits at box offices in Egypt.[13] Critics often understand Egyptian cinema in the transition from the Nasser to Sadat presidencies and into the 1970s as being typified by crass commercialism and low quality. This characterization indicates a particular elitism in Egyptian cinema criticism; at the same time, cinema did suffer setbacks in the level of state support and from major changes in the film industry. During these years, many Egyptian feature films in theaters were melodramatic soap-operas or slapstick comedies designed for mass appeal and attracting large audiences.[14]

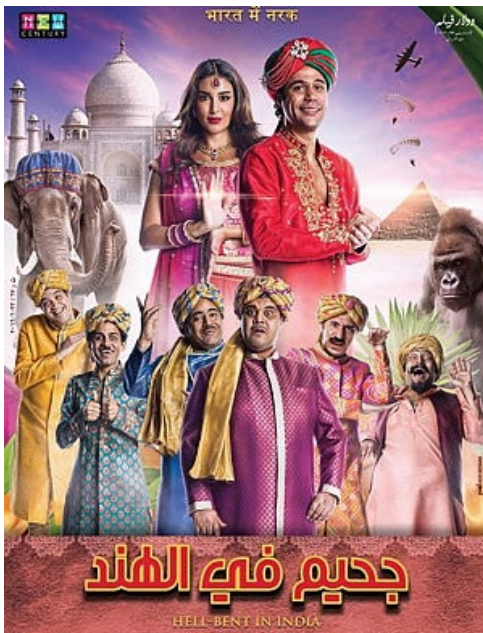




Film poster for an exemplary Egyptian New Realist film *The Bus Driver* (1982) directed by Atef El-Tayeb. As demonstrated through the drab colors of the poster and its unhappy characters, Egyptian New Realism is distinguished for its pessimistic outlook in narrating the effects of economic liberalization on Egyptian Society.



"Did you say *film hindi*?" Mona El Shazly to explains to Amitabh Bachchan how the Egyptian Arabic phrase *film hindi* ("Indian film") means something melodramatic or silly.



Film poster for the widely popular Egyptian film *Hell-Bent in India* (2016). The poster features Egyptian actors wearing "Indian" costumes. The costumes and the teasing aesthetic of the poster and film reflect a tendency to otherize and exoticize India in Egypt.

Alongside this trend in mainstream cinema, Egyptian New Realism emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s in response to the socio-economic changes of the time. Unable to rely on production studios due to small budgets, New Realist filmmakers used Cairo as a backdrop, striving for a "level of realism never before seen in Egyptian cinema." [15] Even though it offered the predominately middle-class perspective of its filmmakers, New Realism focused on problems of the urban lower-class and centered its critiques on the nouveau riche. [16] Films drew associations between the new wealthy classes and corruption, moral depravity, a lack of traditional sense of community, uncontrolled materialism, and criminal practices. [17] While these films depicted the efforts of the nouveau riches to acquire money and property as signs of materialistic moral decay, they attributed morality to the quasi-religious, 'traditional' ideals of community loyalty, generosity, honesty, and the family. [18] Common themes linking films of the Egyptian New Wave include a focus on congested, seemingly inhospitable urban spaces and on telling stories of characters who struggle with moral questions and problems associated with open-market economics.

New Realism also served to foster the notion among elites that Indian musical cinema was escapist and of inferior class status. [19] Thus, in Egyptian Arabic, *film hindi* as a general category denotes melodrama, and "Hindi" in colloquial speech is used to label things that are strange and silly. [20] The 2016 Egyptian film *Gaheem Fil Hind* ("Hell-Bent in India") demonstrates a continued tendency to exoticize India in Egyptian cinematic culture. In telling the story of a group of Egyptian musicians who have been mistakenly tasked by the Egyptian government with saving the Egyptian ambassador to India, the film portrays India as strange and different in a demeaning way with the inclusion of cannibal tribesmen and gorillas in its plot. Yet *Hell-Bent in India* is also a tribute to Indian musical films, and thereby complicates facile understandings of cultural influence and the popularity of stars such as Amitabh Bachchan in Egypt. The film draws on racist codes in its humor, but it also includes a well-made song dance sequence in which its Egyptian actors sing in Hindi. During the highly anticipated post-Ramadan cinema season in 2016, *Hell-Bent in India* was the most successful film in Egyptian theaters and smashed box office records.

Indian cinema's status in Egypt has also depended on in changes in film technology. In addition to exploring the class status and melodramatic valence of Indian cinema in Egypt, I argue that contempt towards Indian cinema in Egypt partly stems from video's ambivalent cultural status. Michael Newman calls cultural status "socially circulating identities informed by [particular] technological and social factors." [21] With the emergence of video, Indian films circulated internationally at considerably higher rates. [22] Home video led to a significant shift in Indian film's international reach and expanded relations between Indian cinema and viewers abroad. [23] The film business in India has long-standing connections with the informal, "black" economy, and these connections grew stronger in the 1970s and 1980s as filmmakers struggled for funding amid high production costs and faced contentious relations with the government (the industry was not given official status until 2001). [24]

With domestic regulations and export restrictions in India standing in the way of Indian cinema's connecting with enthusiastic viewers abroad, Indian cinema's relationship with the informal economy became stronger, especially as the videocassette emerged. [25] In articulating the concept of a "shadow economy" to explain the interplay between formal and informal economies of film distribution, Ramon Lobato describes

"informality as a negative state, outside the formal realm... characterized by handshake deals, reciprocity, gift economies, theft, barter and other modes of exchange and redistribution which bypass institutions." [26]

In this sense, video's association with piracy and the black market led the medium



*Chennai Express* comes to Egypt in 2013, the first time an Indian film is shown in Egyptian theaters for almost two decades. Despite the lengthy gap, Hindi films reached Egypt through video cassettes that traveled along informal networks.

to take on negative cultural connotations.

The introduction of video cassette technology spurred questions related to the medium's ability to travel along unofficial and difficult to regulate channels in both Egypt and India. Joseph Flibbert notes that piracy emerged in Egypt in the 1970s with the rise of video technology, as manifest in the concern U.S. producers and distributors reported over the circulation of Hollywood films. Flibbert does not write specifically about Indian films in Egypt. But it is likely that Indian films—not just U.S. films—were traveling to Egypt and being reproduced illegally.[27] Although official film regulation in India did not necessarily encourage export activity in the 1980s, conditions in Egypt were favorable to piracy until a stronger copyright law with increased penalties for violations was adopted in 1992.[28] Yet an almost 20-year hiatus of the official film distribution of Indian films to Egypt theaters likely contributed to the continued pirating of Indian films. The decree restricting Indian films was lifted in 2013 with the screening of *Chennai Express* in Egyptian theaters.

Video's cultural status was also likely influenced by the spaces in which they were screened. As Barbara Klinger writes, in comparison to celluloid film projected in a cinema, video is considered "a regrettable triumph of convenience over art that disturbs the communion between viewer and film and interferes with judgments of quality." [29] Video perhaps seemed of lesser quality in relation to the more 'authentic' celluloid and the seemingly purer experience that the theater created for viewers. Moreover, those who could not afford a VHS player often attended informal screenings at coffee shops in what were considered lower-class neighborhoods in Cairo.

While celluloid traveled along "official" routes of distribution, it was usually the lowest tier of cheap theaters in *baladi* or "low-class" areas that screened Indian films in the 1980s and 1990s.[30] By the 1980s, movie theaters in many neighborhoods of Cairo had "lost favor in the eyes of cultural gatekeepers as youth had taken them over." [31] This connection between Indian films and cheap theaters with outdated or poorly maintained technology is indicated by Bachchan's appearance in *Dreams of Hind and Camelia*. But such an association under-serves both Hindi cinema and Bachchan's resonance among Egyptian viewers.

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## The sonic stardom of the Angry Young Man



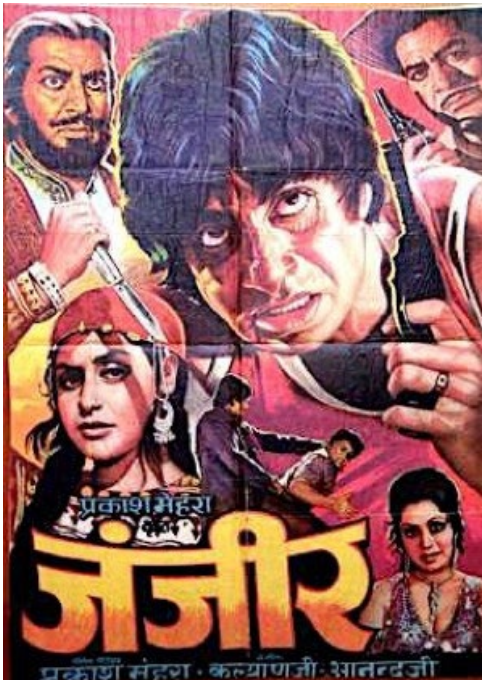
Amitabh Bachchan as Vijay in *Zanjeer* (1973), a role that earned him the moniker of “The Angry Young Man.”

During a visit home to Egypt, legendary Egyptian actor Omar Sharif is rumored to have said “this Amitabh Bachchan seems to be more popular than me in Egypt.”[32] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] Sharif’s comment suggests the importance of Bachchan to Egyptian audiences and Egyptian cinema. Other transnational stars such as Bruce Lee were similarly became popular in Egypt through action films. Yet sound and Bachchan’s role as the anti-hero or “Angry Young Man” distinguished him and the masculinity he projected from other male stars in Egyptian cinematic imaginaries.[33]

Bachchan’s “Angry Young Man” character similarly proved key to his early fame in India. Critics describe Bachchan’s popularity in India as unexpected given his unusual height, lanky limbs, and unconventional looks.[34] Yet Bachchan’s films connected with audiences in India in the way that his characters navigated troubled socioeconomic times. The peak years of Bachchan’s career correspond to the Indian presidency of Indira Gandhi and the Emergency, a period characterized by political and civic unrest on the one hand and persecution, economic volatility, and disillusionment on the other. In 1973, Bachchan skyrocketed to stardom with his portrayal of Vijay in *Zanjeer*. In the groundbreaking crime-action film, Bachchan plays a police officer who, as a child, witnessed the brutal murder of his family and now seeks revenge against the killer. *Zanjeer* established Bachchan as the “Angry Young Man,” a moniker with which he is widely framed in many of his box office hits and understood by fans and filmmakers.

Bachchan’s role as the Angry Young Man in *Zanjeer* and subsequent films departed from earlier established codes in Hindi cinema regarding heroes, the principles they embody and their relation to the law.[35] In his portrayal of The Angry Young Man, Bachchan challenges the notion of the good-natured hero who upholds the ‘correct’ values and meets society’s expectations, which was prevalent in earlier Hindi films. His characters’ struggles often stem from the contradiction between individual autonomy and community in the context of a rapidly changing world.[37] In the face of organized crime and corruption, Bachchan often represents a noble figure operating outside of laws and society.[38] Bachchan’s role as emotive anti-hero and romantic outsider resonated with Indian viewers. Critics have suggested that audiences related to the public humiliation Bachchan’s characters experience for reasons such as caste, class, wealth, gender, and region. [39] Bachchan’s anger stems from a past wrong done to him or his family. His anger is also ignited by the state and its corrupt practices and institutions, a rigid social system, and the seeming impossibility of upward mobility.[40]

In this characterization as romantic anti-hero, Bachchan ultimately epitomized the archetypal masculinity of the male protagonist in Hindi cinema of the period. As The Angry Young Man, Bachchan reflected the difficulties young working-class men experienced. Comments at the time about his lanky limbs, height, facial features, and other aspects of his “unconventional” looks perhaps reflect a class bias with regards to the roles Bachchan played. Male heroes in films from the 1990s hailed from upper-class backgrounds and had physical characteristics that marked them as such. For example, Bachchan’s aesthetic was “followed by the softer, more feminine body of Shah Rukh Khan who often played upper-class Hindu men in most of his popular films in the 1990s.”[41] Bachchan’s characters, in contrast, often sported ripped clothes, unshaven faces, and chest hair. As The



Film poster for Prakash Mehra’s *Zanjeer* that



demonstrates Bachchan's Angry Young Man persona in the film.

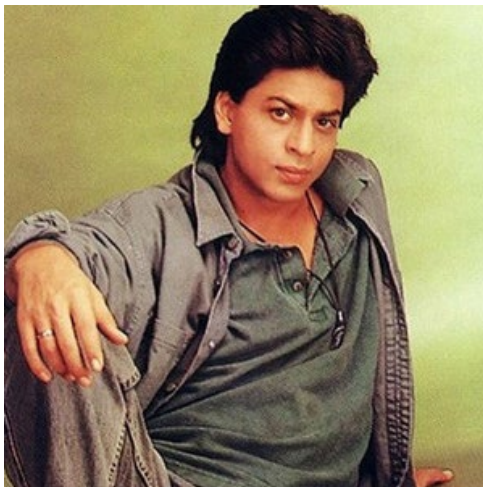
Angry Young Man, Bachchan performed with a typically working-class, masculine aesthetic through which he reflected the physical labor that was required for the average man to make a living.[42] Bachchan performed all of his stunts, feats that helped to authenticate the particular tough masculinity he embodied on screen. In fact, while performing his own stunts for an intense fight scene in the film *Coolie* (1982), Bachchan was severely injured. The event likely enhanced his star persona on and off screen as The Angry Young Man.



Amitabh Bachchan's characters often sported ripped clothes, unshaven faces, and chest hair.



Amitabh Bachchan performing his "trademark" dance in film *Kaalida* (1981).



Bachchan's aesthetic was "followed by the softer, more feminine body of Shah Rukh Khan who often played upper-class Hindu men in most of his popular films in the 1990s."

Bachchan's distinct baritone speaking and singing voice added another dimension to his persona and the masculine persona that he projected. Richard Dyer and other scholars have theorized the concept of "star text" as a means of understanding stardom: the amalgamation of public appearances, interviews, commentaries, gossip, characters, and other publicly available information about stars that extend his or her image beyond a single film.[43] While Dyer and other scholars drawing mostly from Hollywood theorize stardom largely on the basis of images and texts, Vijay Mishra emphasize the role of dialogue and music – sound – in generating stardom in Hindi films [44]. The concept of "star text" proves helpful in differentiating between an individual actor and the way he has been constructed in popular discourse. But it points to a propensity to understand stars as solely visual and textual, instead of "grappling with the range of emotions and visceral sensations that inform audiences' appreciation of and identification with certain stars." [45] The affects and visceral, sonic reactions of viewers in their enjoyment of stars become 'louder' in a framework informed by sound. Furthermore, sound adds important depth to the one-dimensional surfaces, images, and texts often drawn on in stardom studies. Sound proved integral to Bachchan's stardom, or his "sonic stardom."

The concept of sonic stardom, which echoes wider foundations of stardom theorized by Indian film scholars, posits that stars' bodies are encoded by voices and that sound is key to viewers' identification with stars. Bachchan's deep, crisp voice in combination with his iconic lines of dialogue were integral to his anti-heroic, Angry Young Man persona,[46] and authoritative in providing the "voice of the people" of the urban male proletariat.[47] Dramatic film soundtracks cast Bachchan as courageous. In action-sequences, the sound of his punches and kicks and crisp one-liners impart an affect of triumphant excitement. His song-and-dance sequences, on the other hand, add a romantic, sexual dimension to his machismo in the way he uses 'his' singing voice to woo a potential love interest. In these scenes his body, encoded by catchy music, performs impressive dance moves.

Special attention to sound depends our understanding of stardom by exploring how viewers interact with more than just the visual aspects of film stars during and beyond the space of viewing. As Vijay Mishra argues, Bachchan's sonic stardom depends on the "labor of memory" of his fans in the sense that they memorize and repeat his famous lines and songs.[48] Bachchan's presence has



Amitabh Bachchan, surrounded by young fans, recovering in the hospital after his serious accident while filming *Coolie* (1982).

extended far beyond the theater space through audiences' repetition of his famous lines and songs, and his songs have had their own existence apart from film texts through other sound media such as radio and cassette tapes. While Kishore Kumar served as the playback singer for many of Bachchan's performances, Bachchan was unusual in singing songs of his own – especially in contrast to many Hindi film stars. Song and dance scenes play crucial roles in Hindi cinema, yet Mishra argues that dialogue proved even more significant to Bachchan's star personality.[49] In addition to song and dance scenes, films starring Bachchan often featured iconic one-liners that audiences would respond to enthusiastically in the theater with whistles and cheers, and then repeat after leaving the theater. [50]

After playing The Angry Young Man for several years, Bachchan tried other roles. Yet Indian audiences had difficulty relating to Bachchan outside the framework of the Angry Young Man. In India the superstar's popularity waned in the mid-1980s and 1990s and his films did not do as well at box offices as they had during the peak of his career. In addition, Bachchan became embroiled in a corruption scandal after a stint in politics in the late 1980s and early 1990s and lost favor among a portion of his fan base. Susmita Dasgupta contends that the early years of economic changes and reforms initiated in the early 1990s that expanded the role of foreign and private investment set the tone for a new type of star and that Amitabh Bachchan was not a hero fit for this particular historical conjuncture. In contrast to Bachchan's characters who strived and fought for causes more important than himself, protagonists in new films were more concerned with their own rights and aims and avoided political or ideological positioning.[51]



Scenes from *The Great Gambler* (1975), a film that brought Bachchan to Egypt. Despite his later popularity, Bachchan was not known in Egypt at the time.



*The Great Gambler*



*The Great Gambler*

While Bachchan started to become cinematically less important in India at the time, he continued to enjoy superstar status in other contexts, such as Egypt. Even though no one seemed to know of Bachchan when he visited Egypt in 1975 to film *The Great Gambler*, in the years leading up to his Cairo visit in 1991, Bachchan came to attract an enthusiastic following. Interestingly, although economic liberalization in India seemed to call for a new star, a similar context in Egypt in the 1980s meant that Bachchan resonated widely with Egyptian audiences. In the way Bachchan heroically navigated morally bankrupt environments and corrupt institutions symptomatic of policies of Indira Gandhi's presidency in India, he offered a masculinity that resonated with audiences in the context of socio-economic changes and challenges associated with a move towards an open-market economy in Egypt. In contrast to other male stars present in Egyptian cinematic imaginaries in the wake of the implementation of Sadat's Open-Door Policy, Bachchan offered sonic stardom through iconic lines, exciting soundtracks, action scenes punctuated by crisp sound, and song-and-dance sequences. Bachchan's distinct character attributes as romantic anti-hero and his fame's



Bachchan and female superstar and rumored

former lover Rekha in *Silsila* [1981].

integral relation to sound satisfied a need that contemporaneous films did not meet. This proved especially to be the case among female viewers in Egypt, as will be discussed in the next section.

## “Amitabh or nothing”: Hindi films fill a silence in Egypt

When Bachchan arrived in Egypt to attend the Cairo International Film Festival in 1991, thousands of his fans were waiting at the airport. News footage of his 1991 visit depicts young weeping female fans holding signs declaring their love for Bachchan or that ask “Amitabh will you marry me?” Those who had the opportunity to meet Bachchan imitated the moves they had learned from watching the song and dance sequences that made his films famous. Some fans had seen his films so many times that they were able to sing his songs by heart, even though they did not speak Hindi.



Bachchan surrounded by cheering and whistling fans as he walks in downtown Cairo one evening during his visit to Egypt.



Female Egyptian fans perform for Bachchan. They imitate dance moves and sing Hindi lyrics they have learned from watching his films numerous times.



“I love Amitabh,” a sign held by a female fan hoping to catch a glimpse of Bachchan.



Bachchan surrounded by fans at the pyramids.



A fan weeps as she has been given the opportunity to meet Bachchan.



“I skipped two days of school.” Fans changed their daily routines in hopes of seeing Bachchan during his visit to Egypt.

The allure of Amitabh Bachchan’s voice and song-and-dance sequences in Egypt was reflective of the wider popularity of Hindi cinema in the 1980s. Hindi cinema provided a musical presence in the absence of domestically produced musical cinema in Egypt in the late 1970s and 1980s. In contrast to Egyptian films from the 1930s through the 1960s that included song-and-dance sequences featuring famous Egyptian singers, Egyptian New Realist films and comedies starring actors such as Adel Imam did not feature song and music as an integral part of their





Egyptian comedian and actor Adel Imam in satirical Egyptian film *Al-Halfout* (1984).

narratives. Soundtracks of contemporaneous Egyptian cinema of the Egyptian New Wave, for instance, often consisted of diegetic sound and music: traffic sounds such as honking and car engines, and popular music played on radios. In this context, Bachchan's Angry Young Man persona, masculine voice and song-and-dance sequences made him especially popular in Egypt.

Bachchan's characters also satisfied female audiences' desires for a romantic and emotional anti-hero. The masculinity that Bachchan performed proved unique in Egypt's star constellation, and it intimately connected him to earlier singer-actors in Egyptian cinema. An article in a weekly Egyptian arts and politics magazine *Ruz al-Yusuf* entitled "Bachchan...Superman!!", published in December 1991, begins with a question: why is Amitabh Bachchan so popular among young Egyptians? In describing the effect of Bachchan on viewers, the article asks:

"In Egypt, why has Bachchan transformed into a new "Nightingale" among young audiences? He hasn't won their hearts with tender words and effusive feelings, but instead through fighting, destruction, tragedies, tears, crises, misfortunes, and catastrophes."

Here, "Nightingale" refers to a legendary Egyptian crooner and actor Abdel Halim Hafez from the 1950s and 1960s. In addition to his association with Gamal Abdel Nasser, Abdel Halim Hafez was known for his sentimentalist singing and his popularity among female viewers.[52]

Despite noting the two actors' divergences, the *Ruz al-Yusuf* article discusses Bachchan as similar to Abdel Halim Hafez in terms of Hafez's effect on female viewers—such as the legend that women committed suicide upon learning of Hafez's death in 1977. A section about young women's responses to Bachchan describes a series of women: one who "trembles because of him, a second who swears she will marry no one but him since he is the symbol of manhood, a third who learned Hindi for him, a fourth who skipped two days of school in order to catch a glimpse of him, and a fifth who exclaims 'Amitabh or nothing.'"



"Bachchan... Superman!" an article in Egyptian magazine *Ruz al-Yusuf* tries to understand Bachchan's fame in Egypt.



Abdel Halim Hafez projected a debonair masculinity through his sentimental singing and roles in romantic films.



A cartoon of Abdel Halim Hafez published in *Ruz al-Yusuf* 33 years before Bachchan's appearance in the magazine. The cartoon emphasizes Abdel Halim Hafez's effect on female audience members. Some cry, some make eye-contact with him, and one has fainted due to her excitement at hearing and seeing "The Nightingale" live.



Hind and Camelia become friends while working as maids for families that live in the same building. This scene, in which Hind peels potatoes and Camelia drinks tea while sitting on the building's inner staircase, points to the way in which they get through the drudgery of the day through conversations with each other.

Bachchan's popularity suggests a nostalgia for the kind of character that Hafez played during the so-called "Golden Age" in Egyptian cinema. Egyptian cinema of the 1950s and 1960s was largely associated with acting/singing stars such as Hafez, Omar Sharif, and Farid al-Atrash who played upper or middle-class modernist heroes and projected a sensitive and suave masculinity.[53] These films were produced at the height of Arab nationalism, as embodied by the presidency of Gamal Abdel Nasser. Plotlines of these films were often optimistic and many told romantic stories. Yet defeat to Israel in the Six Day War of 1967 was a watershed moment for a generation of Egyptians who became disillusioned with Nasser's Arab nationalism.

Although deplored by some, many remember the Nasser years fondly as a better and more dignified time in Egypt. Given the parallels between Bachchan and Hafez and the qualities their characters embodied, Bachchan resonated with female desires and hopes in the contemporaneous socio-political context of Hosni Mubarak's continued liberalization of the Egyptian economy and rising authoritarianism in the 1980s. In this regard, Mohammed Khan's *Dreams of Hind and Camelia* provides an especially vivid example of Amitabh's appeal amongst Egyptian lower and middle-class female viewers. Many New Realist directors' films are serious in tone and pessimistic in outlook. Mohammed Khan's films, in contrast, tend to focus on the pleasures of life and people's feelings and desires.





*Dreams of Hind and Camelia* takes place in the 1980s and portrays the story of two female friends, Hind and Camelia, who work as domestic laborers in Cairo. Hind is a widow who has come from the countryside to Cairo, and Camelia is a divorcee from the city who is physically unable to have children. Khan's films usually tell the stories of working-class characters, and their scripts often focus on issues related to class hierarchy, patriarchy, and women's labor. In *Dreams of Hind and Camelia*, Khan seemingly connects these issues to the larger socio-political context of The Open-Door Policy. The Open-Door Policy ushered a host of changes in Egypt such as the rapid growth of Cairo and other major cities with migration from the countryside and a widening gap between upper and lower classes. The effects of these economic programs of the 1970s in Egypt continued to increase in scope and scale into the 1980s.



In the context of complaining about their employers and their resistance to get re-married ...



... Hind and Camelia scheme of ways they can gather enough money to live with each other on their own.

 A still from a film showing a woman with a blue headscarf and a man with a mustache and glasses. The man is wearing a grey shirt and has his hand near his face. The woman is looking at him. There is a small logo in the top right corner and a watermark 'akoam.co' in the bottom right corner.	 A still from a film showing a woman in a white dress sitting on a bed or couch, looking down. There is a small logo in the top right corner and a watermark 'akoam.co' in the bottom right corner.
Camelia ultimately reluctantly marries a co-worker of her brother's, a heavy-handed and crass man named Osman.	In this scene, while Camelia and Hind do housework together, Camelia explains what it's like to be married: before she was married she was a maid for rent, now she's a maid that works for free.
 A still from a film showing a man in a white shirt, looking intense. There is a small logo in the top right corner and a watermark 'akoam.co' in the bottom right corner.	 A still from a film showing a woman in a blue headscarf and a man in a grey shirt. The woman is looking up and the man is looking to the side. There is a small logo in the top right corner and a watermark 'akoam.co' in the bottom right corner.
In one scene, Camelia joins Hind and 'Eid on their date to see a Bruce Lee action film. Hind has become interested in a relationship with 'Eid, and so has invited Camelia to go out with them. Yet the dark theater and close spaces in this context	As we hear sounds of an action-scene from the Bruce Lee film, we watch as 'Eid's hand sneakily slides from Hind's shoulder to Camelia's side. Camelia is too embarrassed to tell 'Eid to stop, so she gets up and leaves before the film ends.





'Eid, a petty thief, has told Hind that he intends to marry her. Yet it is clear that he only wants sex and to steal from Hind and her employer. One day, he finds out where Hind works and comes to see her while her employer is away. Hind lets 'Eid in grudgingly, and while she is in the kitchen making tea, 'Eid invites his friend Anwar in the apartment. While 'Eid and Hind are in the kitchen, Anwar goes through the apartment taking jewelry, technology, and other expensive items. Hind is horrified when she learns what Anwar is doing, but is unable to stop him. Hind ultimately has to run away from her job as she risks being accused for the theft.

provide more of an opportunity for 'Eid to be touchy-feely with Hind, and then to grope Camelia.

The narrative of *Dreams of Hind and Camelia* largely centers on Hind and Camelia's experiences as maids dealing with demanding and selfish employers, their largely negative and often abusive relationships with the men in their lives, and their close friendship. The film also more broadly documents the economic injustices that working and lower class women face. In telling the story of their close, almost sister-like friendship, Khan's film also focuses on Hind and Camelia's enjoyment of leisure time together and conversations in which they share their hopes for the future. These moments allow the best friends to enter a space in which they can make plans to runaway and live together free of abusive husbands and demanding employers. Through their friendship, Hind and Camelia resist the "self-enclosed individualism" that often pits individuals against their peers and the rest of the world in contexts of neoliberalism.[54] Hind and Camelia laugh, cry, and share their secrets and aspirations with each other. By the end of the film, they are essentially life partners and they raise Hind's baby, Ahlam, together.

Hind and Camelia also support each other in the midst and aftermath of the abuse they suffer at the hands of husbands, brothers, and employers. In one scene of the film, Hind and Camelia go to the movies, and then out to dinner. The "girls' night out" follows a scene in which Camelia's husband forces Camelia to sleep with him. Hind, who needs a place to stay after 'Eid and his friend Anwar stole from her employer, is sleeping at Camelia's apartment for the night. While Camelia fights with her husband and tries to stall his advances, Hind can only helplessly and uncomfortably listen from another room. The next evening, the best friends go out to the movies to cope with this instance of marital rape. The film they choose to see is Prayag Raaj's 1985 Hindi-film, *Geraftaar*.



Camelia comforts Hind after she had to run away from her employer. Hind fears they'll find her and accuse her of stealing, but Camelia assures her that no one will find Hind at her place. She asks Hind to stay with her and Osman for the time being.



Camelia's husband Osman forcefully attempts to sleep with her, yelling angrily that it is his right. Camelia ultimately gives in.



Hind listens uncomfortably and helplessly from the couch as Camelia struggles against Osman in the next room. After they're finished, Camelia tells Osman that Hind will stay with them for a few days. Osman becomes incensed, and throws them out of the apartment. The next morning, Osman feels guilty so he gives Camelia extra money for groceries



Camelia furiously destroys the mattress that she and Osman share the day after he makes her sleep with him.

*Geraftaar* echoes the themes and storylines of the other films in the 1980s phase of Bachchan's Angry Young Man persona. Similar to films such as *Zanjeer*, *Geraftaar* is an action film that follows Karan (Bachchan) and other protagonists as they seek to avenge the wrongs done to them and their families. *Dreams of Hind and Camelia* includes clips from scenes of *Geraftaar* that feature Amitabh Bachchan: a song-and-dance sequence with Karan and his love interest, Geeta (Madhavi), and a scene in which Karan holds his adopted brother Hussein in his arms while Hussein dies. Such scenes highlight Bachchan's antihero characteristics and his heroism, loyalty, and moral fortitude. But they also showcase his romantic qualities.



Camelia and Hind watch a colorful and romantic song-and-dance sequence of "Dhoop Mein Nikla Na Karo" from *Geraftaar* featuring Amitabh Bachchan and Madhavi.



The dialogue and lyrics of the version of *Geraftaar* they see in theaters is subtitled in English and Arabic, and the playback singers are Ashla Bhosle and Kishore Kumar.

In the almost two-minute sequence that the film devotes to *Geraftaar*, *Dreams of Hind and Camelia* shows us the range of emotions that Hind and Camelia go through in response to the scenes they see of love, courage, and friendship. Hind and Camelia look mesmerized as they watch Geeta and Karan have what seems to

be a lover's quarrel in a song-and-dance sequence.

In the next scene, the friends weep while watching villain Vijay burn Hussein alive, and then seeing Hussein die in Karan's arms. In an action scene, Karan heroically saves Geeta and Kishen as one of Vijay's henchmen is about to run them over in a massive tractor. Hind and Camelia watch anxiously.



In this tragic scene of *Geraftaar*, villain Vijay burns Hussein alive. Karan (Bachchan) holds Hussein – his adopted brother – in his arms while Hussein dies.



Suspenseful music plays on the soundtrack as Geeta and Kishen try to avoid getting crushed by an enormous construction truck.



Luckily, Karan pushes them out of the way just in time. Hind and Camelia watch nervously as the scene unfolds.

In cutting back and forth between *Geraftaar* and Hind and Camelia's reactions in the theater, moreover, *Dreams of Hind and Camelia* also highlights the contrast between the world of the Hindi film and the Egyptian reality. The spectacular and colorful scenes of *Geraftaar* accentuate the realist and muted aesthetic of *Dreams of Hind and Camelia*.

Khan frames *Geraftaar* in a way that suggests Amitabh Bachchan and his films satisfied a need among viewers; in addition to providing pleasure through song, Bachchan projected a mode of masculinity that resonated in the Egyptian context. He expresses emotion and adamantly seeks justice through his characters. Karan's actions stand in sharp contrast to Camelia's lecherous husband Osman, as well as Hind's worthless and unethical husband 'Eid. The difference between the actions of their husbands and Karan suggests the impact of on the socio-economic context on the men in their lives; such policies have been significant factors in their becoming desperate, cheap, and abusive. *Geraftaar* is used in the film to



indicate Hind and Camelia's alienation from their own situation. But it also allows them to imagine and momentarily inhabit an alternative reality. In contrast to the false promises of prosperity and mobility implied through The Open-Door Policy, *Geraftaar* provides a space of belonging that perhaps alleviates the felt reality of the deleterious social effects and burdens of *al infitāh*. This sequence and others in the film give space for the dreams of Hind and Camelia that the false promises of neoliberalism do not provide.

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

In one sense, Amitabh Bachchan's presence in *Dreams of Hind and Camelia* is symptomatic of Egyptian audiences' fascination with stars in the 1980s. The importance of stars in fact presented a conundrum for Khan and other filmmakers in Egypt who struggled with financing; when explaining the decline in film production in Egypt in an article in 1991, Khan cites viewers' obsession with stars (in addition to the lack of state support) as major problems. Khan writes, "a star's salary is half of a film's budget in Egypt. How can you afford the other aspects of the film?"[55] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Khan and other New Realist directors were obliged to cast famous Egyptian stars in their films in order to attract audiences. *Dreams of Hind and Camelia* features Egyptian superstars Naglaa Fathi and Ahmed Zaki. By incorporating clips from Bruce Lee and Amitabh Bachchan's films, moreover, the film acknowledges that viewers' fascination with stars bypasses national borders

Bachchan was one of several popular male stars available to Egyptian audiences in the 1980s. Egyptian film stars Nur al-Sharif, Ahmed Zaki and Mahmud 'Abd al-'Aziz provided familiar faces and voices in the quasi-documentary films of Egyptian New Realism. The late 1970s and 1980s also saw the rise of actor Adel Imam, a widely popular comedian who often portrayed the "Egyptian Everyman" in comedic, sarcastic ways in roles in mainstream commercial cinema.[56] Transnational stars also factored into Egyptian cinematic imaginaries. Thus Hollywood actors such as Arnold Schwarzenegger maintained a presence in Egypt in the 1970s and 1980s, despite the fact that Hollywood films were not as popular as they had been in previous decades.[57] Martial arts icon Bruce Lee was especially popular among audiences for his action sequences in films and the type of working-class hero he represented.

Yet *Dreams of Hind and Camelia* points to Hindi cinema's role in satisfying a need among Egyptian audiences for song-and-dance scenes as well as for a brave, attractive, and commendable hero. In his films, Bachchan's characters not only seemed more heroic, but also more sentimental and romantic than those found in other films present in cinematic imaginaries in Egypt. Through singing Bachchan's songs and watching his films numerous times, viewers helped to inscribe Bachchan's presence in Egyptian cinematic soundscapes. Repeat viewings provide distinct pleasures and effects, including the memorization and appreciation of dialogue, and nostalgia.[58] Such a practice "allows viewers to use certain films to articulate their identities" and communicate their dreams and hopes.[59]



"You have a good singing voice," Mona El Shazly says to Amitabh Bachchan in the midst of showering him with compliments about his acting, dancing, and singing.

In the Egyptian context, moreover, there seems to be a continued connection between Bachchan's voice and his body due to a general lack awareness of playback singing in Hindi cinema among Egyptian audiences. Since the 1940s, playback singers have sung the songs in Hindi films. The practice is known to Indian audiences, who experience the pleasure of a dual-star phenomenon in seeing the body of a famous star and hearing the voice of a famous singer.[60] In Egypt, the practice of playback singing in India is less understood. In the interview with Amitabh Bachchan, for instance, Mona Shazly expresses her surprise when she learns that Bachchan does not sing all of his songs. She compliments Bachchan on how he sings the well-known Hindi song "My Name is Anthony," but Bachchan informs her it is not his voice. Shazly's surprise at the notion of playback singing suggests that Egyptian viewers expect a direct correspondence between Bachchan's voice and body in his films. The notion of a direct correspondence between Bachchan's body and voice contributes further to an idealized masculinity among viewers. Out of the context of the film's production and initial reception in India, Bachchan seemed unmediated and pure



Bachchan insists he is not a singer, and attributes the quality of his singing voice in films to devices such as auto-tune. El Shazly then mentions that his Bachchan's voice in the Hindi song "My Name is Anthony" is excellent. Bachchan informs her that a playback singer actually sang "My Name is Anthony," not Bachchan himself.



Annoyed, Hind and Camelia whistle when *Geraftaar* stops abruptly due to a technical issue. The low-quality of the theater reinforces the notion that Hindi films are predominately shown in *baladi* or "popular" theaters.

among Egyptian viewers.

However, the way in which Khan incorporates *Geraftaar* in *Dreams of Hind and Camelia* also reinforces a particular prevalent conception in Egypt of Hindi film as enjoyed solely by the poor (despite the fact that it is widely popular among Egyptian audiences from a range of socio-economic backgrounds). In addition to framing *Geraftaar* as a film for poorer audiences in positioning it as popular among audiences such as Hind and Camelia, *Dreams of Hind and Camelia* makes associations between shoddy technology, lower-tier theaters, and Hindi films. While Hind and Camelia watch *Geraftaar*, the film is abruptly interrupted due to a technical problem and the low-quality of the theater. This break unravels Hind and Camelia's Bachchan-induced reverie and brief getaway from their every-day lives.

As the same *Ruz al-Yusuf* article that describes young Egyptian women's obsession with Bachchan continues, it likens the phenomenon of Bachchan's popularity in Egypt to a virus virus:

"we have discovered a new sickness spreading under the skin of society, just like extremism, sectarian strife, an odor, rape, and other cancerous phenomena that have assaulted society in the past few years... extremism is not limited to behavior, but it also extends to tastes, sensibilities and feelings." [61]

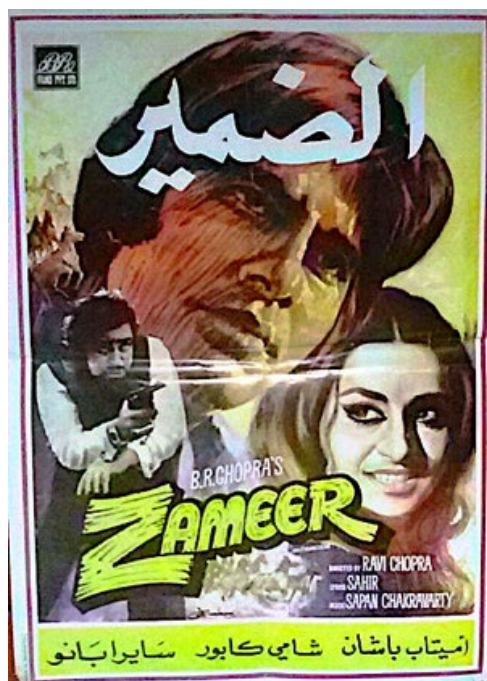
Rather than a phenomenon to celebrate, the article describes Bachchan's popularity in Egypt as a form of extremism and a spreading sickness. Branded as low-class among cultural elites, the way Indian films are framed and ignored on an official level in Egypt brings attention to the class and racial dynamics of film criticism and global media flows. [62]

## Conclusion

Film studies often analyzes stars within a nation's borders and makes associations between film sound and national cinema. [63] Tracing the travels of Bachchan's and other Hindi films beyond India and the routes of the Indian Diaspora turns up the volume of important dimensions of Hindi cinema and its stars. Amitabh Bachchan's stardom in Egypt is an example of the larger affective and sonic impact that Hindi cinema had on Egyptian audiences and filmmakers in the 1980s. Through voice, singing, and the masculinity Bachchan projected, Bachchan's characters resonated with Egyptian audiences in the context of socio-economic changes initiated during Sadat's Open-Door Policy. Within his films, Bachchan's Angry Young Man characters often hail from humble backgrounds, express sentimentality and romance, and demonstrate a moral disposition that contrasts with the individualistic, swashbuckling heroes often found in Hollywood films. Bachchan's heroic feats and love stories similarly contrast with the serious, downtrodden characters of Egyptian New Realism. The appeal of Bachchan's characters dovetailed with a nostalgia for heartthrob Egyptian singer-actors such as Abdel Halim Hafez. Moreover, the presence of Hindi films filled important absences with the lack of musical films in the way many of Bachchan's films featured song-and-dance sequences.

In addition to contributing to theories of stardom, study of Amitabh Bachchan





Posters for Hindi films featuring Amitabh Bachchan written in Arabic.

and Hindi cinema in Egypt highlights the dissonances or tensions of the transnational travels of stars. In one sense, neglect of Indian cinema's presence in Egypt on official and scholarly levels indicates how technology contributes to Indian cinema's ambivalent, unrecognized presence in Egypt; with the increasingly accessible technology of video in the 1980s Hindi films became associated with piracy. On another level, Eurocentric-informed film criticism often obscures or precludes consideration of networks and affiliations such as those between Egypt and India that are facilitated by phenomena such as Bachchan's sonic stardom. Through a practice of "strategically bracketing" the assumed center of Hollywood and its hegemony, therefore, a thread of the rich history of exchange between Egypt and India emerges. [64] Understanding Bachchan's sonic stardom and popularity in Egypt contributes to global media theories that seek to "bring into critical consciousness the already operational transnational cine-communities and media assemblages" that make a hegemonic and all-encompassing model such as those theorized according to Hollywood untenable. [65] The case of Bachchan's sonic stardom in Egypt demonstrates how a framework informed by sound and stardom challenges the timelines and borders that media studies often takes for granted.



Posters such as these written in Arabic point to the currency of Indian cinema in Egypt and challenge the ascendancy of Hollywood in global film scholarship.

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Anjanette Abayari as Darna in *Darna Ang Pagbabalik* (Viva Family Entertainment, 1994)



Cosplayer Isabel Cortez dresses as Darna, superheroine from Filipino comics, TV, and movies. Photo by Erving Go. Flickr. 10 January 2015. Web. 25 April 2017. [https://www.flickr.com/photos/izabel\\_cortez/16310417964](https://www.flickr.com/photos/izabel_cortez/16310417964)

## The American and non-American ways of superhero cinema

by [Ezra Claverie](#)

Review of *Superheroes on World Screens*. Ed. Rayna Denison and Rachael Mizsei-Ward. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2015. 224 pages. Casebound \$60. Paperback \$30. Eleven black-and-white illustrations.

*Superheroes on World Screens* began as a call for papers entitled, “Not Just the American Way,” which signaled its goal of challenging the assumed Americanness of the superhero genre. The resulting collection looks at some of the ways this genre has traveled internationally, not just with the recent overseas successes of Hollywood superhero blockbusters, but for as long as U.S. comics have traveled overseas and as long as Hollywood studios have pried their way into other countries’ film distribution systems. The anthology aims “to create a space for future debates about the figure of the superhero” by widening its geographic scope (16).

The essays here deal only tangentially with comics as a medium and comic books as a platform, yet these case studies will nevertheless interest scholars working on the transmedia or transnational circulation of characters produced by the U.S. comics industry. Other scholarship has looked at the production of superhero screen texts outside the United States, for example, Miller et al.’s case study of the production of *Blade II* in Prague, Cherish Brillon’s work on the *Darna* franchise in the Philippines, and Mark Gallagher’s “Batman in East Asia.” But *Superheroes on World Screens* assembles in one place a range of research on both texts and contexts, thereby offering both an overview and a model for this emerging sub-field. Some essays here look at the international co-production and marketing of films (and, to a lesser extent, television) based on characters owned by the DC-Marvel duopoly; others look at films produced outside the United States and based on local characters. The book therefore warrants attention from scholars of international film co-production, distribution, and adaptation, as well as anyone studying superheroes as they circulate or arise outside the United States.

The essays’ subject matter ranges widely from superheroes as classically defined (by Peter Coogan and others) to characters having less clear connections to the four-color, long-underwear heroes of the U.S. comics duopoly. For example, Kevin Patrick’s essay looks at how the film version of *The Phantom* (Simon Wincer, 1996), shot in partly in Australia and with significant Australian investment and talent, exploited Australian fans’ fondness for the U.S. newspaper comic strip, syndicated internationally since its 1936 inception. Vincent M. Gainey’s analysis of the production and distribution of *Thor* (Kenneth Branagh, 2011) reveals a multinational production by a U.S. media conglomerate aiming for international audiences. Editor Rayna Denison examines Marvel Comics’ licensing of Spider-Man to Japanese studio Toei in the 1970s, which resulted in the fascinating oddity *Supaidāman*. This hybrid combined tropes from U.S. superhero comics with tropes from the Japanese *tokusatsu* (“special effects”) TV genre, where science ninjas and giant robots fight alien monsters in shows like Tsuburaya Productions’ *Ultraman* [*Urutoraman*] (1966-67) and Toei’s earlier *Kamen Rider* [*Kamen*



British actor Idris Elba played a salient supporting role in *Thor* (Marvel Studios, 2011). Though white supremacists objected to the casting of a Black actor as Heimdall, guardian of Asgard's Bifrost Bridge, they might have been glad when Elba's role amounted to little more than an immortal elevator operator.



Vincent M. Gaine notes that in Japanese ads for *Thor* (Marvel Studios, 2011), Japanese actor Tadanobu Asano appeared instead of Idris Elba, despite Asano's few lines in the film.



Gaine argues that Asano's casting signals demographic inclusion and international market segmentation. Although Asano plays one of the *Warriors Three*, he hardly speaks compared to the other two, played by the U.S. actor Josh Dallas (left) and the British George Stevenson (center).



*Raidā*] (1971-73). Lincoln Geraghty's account of *Doctor Who* promotion at San Diego Comic-Con claims, with a straight face, "Doctor Who is arguably the quintessential superhero" (88). Daniel Martin discusses the Japanese-Korean animated co-production *Blade of the Phantom Master* (Joji Shimura and Ahn Tae-geun, 2004) in the context of South Korea's rise from Japan's shadow to become a major exporter of mass culture. Ian Robert Smith charts multiple waves of superhero films in India, in both the Hindi and Tamil cinemas, from knock-offs of Superman to original heroes written for the screen.

Jochen Ecke and Patrick Gill draw connections between British television shows, both comedic and dramatic, that use the figure of the superhero to address social inequality and the UK's cultural relation to the United States. Editor Rachel Mizsei-Ward's essay looks at the international career of the Kuwaiti comic series *The 99* and its adaptation into an animated cartoon (Endemol Productions UK, 2011-12). Islamophobic reactionaries in America scared the cable company Hub Network (a Hasbro subsidiary) into dumping the Kuwaiti show because of its supposed promotion of *sharia*. Finally, Mary J. Ansle treats the Thai superhero film *Insee Daeng* (Wisit Sasanatieng, 2010) in the context of both contemporary Thai cinema and this film's mixture of homage to the 1960s *Insee Daeng* ("Red Eagle") films and political criticism of its present.

The strongest chapters offer materialist accounts of the production of their focal texts. Gaine, in his chapter on *Thor* (Kenneth Branagh, 2011), attends to the mechanics of international production and co-production, parsing the film's use of above-the-line talent to appeal to various markets as well as its outsourcing of the film's visual effects to studios around the world. Most criticism of superheroes that deals with the genre in terms of myth attend little, if at all, to production and circulation; in contrast, Gaine uses Miller et al.'s concept of the New International Division of Cultural Labor (36-37), and the not-so-new division of ownership, concentrated in the shareholding classes of the Global North. Moreover, unlike most writers who deal with the relationships between superheroes and myth, Gaine cites not the crowd-pleasing PhD-dropout Joseph Campbell (along with Carl Gustav Jung, one of the red flags of hack "pop culture" criticism) but anthropologist Victor Turner (48), whose work on liminality informs Gaine's reading of the film's planet-hopping narrative and its international marketing.

Denison's chapter presents an almost equally satisfying account of the history of *The 99*, a show bankrolled in part by the *sharia*-compliant Islamic Unicorn Investment Bank and explicitly aimed at "reframing the discourse surrounding Islam after 9/11" (150). Reactionary U.S. bloggers criticized the show's depiction of ninety-nine superheroes with powers based on a list of ninety-nine Koranic virtues, and they convinced Hasbro's Hub Network not to broadcast the series (151). Yet after this setback, the show's producers secured distribution by Netflix, by which point the reactionary bloggers moved on to other targets (166). Here one might ask for a fuller account of the business side of *The 99* franchise, how investors or licensors profited from either the production or the distribution of this adaptation of a superhero comic, and how the comic's creators did or did not profit from those circulations.

Further, we might ask what values both *sharia*-compliant and non-*sharia*-compliant banks share, and how those values necessarily filter both explicit religious messaging and all other content. Other chapters offer similar opportunities for scholars to build on the work done here. Smith's chapter on Indian superhero films applies Yuri Lotman's five-step model of the development of national culture industries on the pattern of Tom O'Regan's *Australian National Cinema* (115). The Indian film *Superman* (B. Gupta, 1987) not only remakes Warner Brothers' *Superman* (Richard Donner, 1978), but it also lifts special-effects sequences, complete with John Williams's "Superman March."



In this Hindi knock-off *Superman* (Fine Art Pictures, 1987), director B. Gupta re-stages many shots and scenes from Warner Brothers' 1978 *Superman: The Movie* (when not simply lifting special effects sequences).



In *Superman* (Fine Art Pictures, 1987), Shekhar, the alien orphan, saves his adoptive parents from being crushed beneath their truck.



Marvel licensed Spider-Man to Toei Company, which produced *Supaidaman* (1978-79) for Japanese television.



Spider-Man (lower left) cowers before the colossal Machine BEM Cockroach in "Cockroach Boy: Great War," episode twenty-four of *Supaidaman* (Toei Company).

Although Smith's essay offers a history of how the Indian superhero film genre moved from such knock-offs to originals like *Krrish* (Rakesh Roshan, 2006), it never discusses how DC Comics or Time Warner responded to piracy of one of their most recognizable properties in the same year that Warners distributed Cannon Films' *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* (Sidney J. Furie). Nor does Smith's essay raise issues of intellectual property or the Indian film market's history of imperviousness to Hollywood domination, issues relevant to understanding such trans-cultural copying. What did DC and Warner executives have to say about B. Gupta's cut and paste job? Did they even watch the Indian market enough to notice?

Like much criticism of popular genres, this book's essays sometimes suffer from a fannish disregard of the sausage factory that produces entertainment franchises, instead focusing on hybridity, ubiquity, nostalgia, and above all "fun." The introduction's first paragraph (unnecessarily) reminds us that U.S. superheroes have traveled worldwide: "Their images have been co-opted for purposes commercial and political, and those creating superhero texts range from media conglomerates to grassroots fans" (Denison, Mizsei-Ward, Johnston 3). The claim that anyone has "co-opted" superheroes suggests that they and their images somehow precede commercial purposes, yet anyone familiar with the history of the DC-Marvel duopoly, or with the film studios that bought them, knows that commercial purposes have always preceded the creation of art both in this corporate genre and in the disposable medium of comics that gave it birth. "Grassroots" versions not only come later but also arrive entangled with the commercial purposes of those who own the copyrights.

The book's introduction frames the collection's aim to go "beyond a textual formulation of the superhero genre, instead reconsidering superheroes as parts of larger cultural matrices (Brooker 2012) or intertextual networks (Meehan 1991)" (5). The authors here cite Eileen Meehan's foundational essay, "Holy Commodity Fetish, Batman!": the Political Economy of a Commercial Intertext," which looks at *Batman* (Tim Burton, 1989) not as a movie but as a Time Warner marketing strategy designed to feed the conglomerate's internal markets. Meehan's work reveals not an aca-fan's intertextual network, a playground of textual poaching and cosplay, but a corporate intertextual network, mediated by contracts and attorneys to serve the needs of shareholders. Yet few of the book's chapters show adequate attention to political economy, instead favoring "cultural matrices" more or less abstracted from production and ownership.

The book merits attention from scholars and from university libraries building collections on either superheroes or international media production. The book's weaknesses, symptomatic of much "popular culture" scholarship (and para-scholarship) suggest areas where others can intervene, expand, and otherwise enrich the debate that the book seeks to widen, as well as ways that we can hold edited collections to higher standards. For example, a surprising number of essays in the book draw on work published by para-scholarly press McFarland. In her essay on *Supaidaman*, for example, Denison notes that U.S. comics companies have a history of licensing their intellectual property "to producers from other nations" (53-54). Denison cites as her source for this claim Dan O'Rourke and Pravin A. Rodrigues's essay, "The 'Transcreation' of a Mediated Myth: Spider-Man in India" from the 2007 McFarland collection *The Amazing Transforming Superhero!* (exclamation point in original) First, why cite a secondary source for this information, when most readers—who either study either duopoly comics or Japanese mass culture—already know of licensed *manga* versions of Batman and other U.S. characters? Second, why not do better than a McFarland anthology? We can maybe excuse the editors' impulse to cite more rather than fewer sources, but not the failure to vet those sources: among various missteps, the essay by O'Rourke and Rodrigues repeatedly cites articles from *Wikipedia*: not the Free Encyclopedia's sources but its edited-by-anyone articles (O'Rourke and Rodriguez 122-123). That would not fly in better high schools; leaving aside why it flies at McFarland, scholars editing a collection like *Superheroes on World Screens*

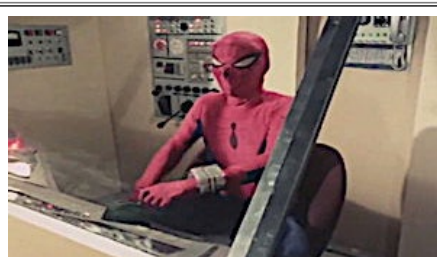




Spider-Man summons Marveller, his remote-controlled giant plane that transforms into a robot, in "Cockroach Boy: Great War" (Toei Company).

should not regard such work as authoritative, especially on a point that arguably counts as common knowledge for this audience. Why not just present and cite a primary source, like some hybrid U.S.-Japanese superhero *manga*?

Yet the book's strengths point to where other scholars might build related arguments. Hollywood's use of international co-production has only increased since the call for papers that spawned this book, with duopoly superhero films now using locations around the world and increasingly courting Mainland China. Qingdao-based Dalian Wanda Group now owns great swaths of the U.S. theatrical film exhibition market; Mainland Chinese locations and stars now feature prominently in franchises like *Star Wars* and *The Transformers*, while ads for *X-Men: Dark Phoenix* (Simon Kinberg, 2019) and *Spider-Man: Far from Home* (Jon Watts, 2019) fill the Metro stations of Shanghai. These developments suggest only one possible direction for future research in this area. As with any edited collection, most scholars will find only a handful of these essays useful, but the better ones here offer windows on national cinemas, genres, and production practices little studied in Anglophone scholarship. They will no doubt make their way into topics courses and bibliographies for years to come.



Spider-Man pilots Leopardon, his giant robot, into battle in "Cockroach Boy: Great War" (Toei Company).



Leopardon, Spider-Man's giant robot, prepares to unleash Sword Vigor against Machine Bem Cockroach in "Cockroach Boy: Great War" (Toei Company).

([Go to Works Cited page](#))



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## Third cinema, queer technique, and Manila's multiple characters

review by [Josen Masangkay Diaz](#)

of Joel David's *Manila by Night (A Queer Film Classic)*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2017. 204 pages, \$17.95.

*Manila by Night* (1980) remains a hallmark of third cinema, and Ishmael Bernal—more than two decades after his death—endures as one of the Philippines' most esteemed filmmakers. *Manila* is arguably the best of Bernal's most notable films, an impressive list that includes *Nunal sa Tubig* (Speck on the Water) (1976) and *Himala* (Miracle) (1982). Nearly forty years after its initial release, Bernal's film remains a provocative portrait of Manila's myriad cast of characters as well as its spirit, rhythm, and grit. In his monograph, esteemed film and cultural studies scholar Joel David treats it as such.



*Manila* filmmaker Ishmael Bernal, one of the Philippines' most esteemed filmmakers

David views *Manila* as underappreciated and misunderstood, and his analysis here emerges as the only book devoted entirely to the film. While much scholarship has highlighted *Manila*'s significance as a cinematic or queer text, or as emblematic of the cultural milieu of Philippine dictatorship, David's book discusses these ideas together to capture the "world" of the film.[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] The study, with its careful attention to the film's aesthetics, style, and context as well as to Bernal's own biography, offers a solid foundation for analyzing present-day queer, third, and Philippine cinema.

For David, *Manila*'s queerness emerges not only in its identifiably queer



*Manila by Night* (1980) has undergone, according to David, a “misunderestimation.”

characters (Kano and Manay) but especially in its treatment of gender and sexuality as multifarious and porous. The film highlights this queerness through its innovative style and multiple-character format, a format that challenges the form of western cinema, ideas that I discuss later in the review.

Released in 1980 near the height of the Marcos dictatorship, the film drew the ire of First Lady Imelda Marcos. Banned for a time from Philippine theaters, the administration’s censorship board forced Bernal to remove all mention of Manila (hence the film’s other title, *City after Dark*) and cut lengthy sex scenes; it also denied the film’s entry to the Berlin International Film Festival. For David, even though international reviewers acknowledged the film’s innovation, the film often failed to receive deserving accolades from “Western festival scouts who favored standard Marxist-inflected social critiques coupled with surface gloss” (114). Even so, David makes clear that Filipino audiences responded well to *Manila*’s portrayals of urban life and sexuality and its stylistic elements, which drew from genres like the “bold film” which proliferated in the Philippines during the 1970s and 1980s.

David tackles the film’s broad social scope, and he addresses various misreadings that surrounded its reception. More important, the book insists upon a new reading of the film in order to point to the indispensability of queer cultural production to political criticism and resistance. As it emerged from the repressive conditions of the Ferdinand Marcos dictatorship (1965-1986), the film stands as a testament to the role of cultural production as a way to articulate the insidiousness of the regime’s violence and conditions of neocolonialism and globalization that continue in the Philippines and to imagine modes of circumventing—even resisting—the totality of the regime’s force.



Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos oversaw a censorship board that drastically affected *Manila*’s circulation in the Philippines and outside of the country.

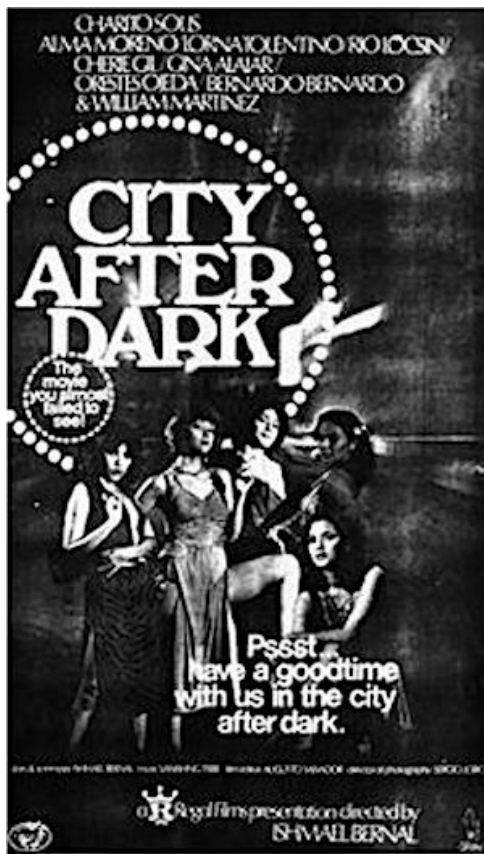
## *Manila*’s formal elements

David’s interdisciplinary approach to analysis relies upon an impressive breadth of knowledge of film history and theory, critical studies and queer theory, and Philippine history. The book provides an intricate analysis of the film that encourages further reflection upon Bernal’s artistry and impact and the continued significance of *Manila* in the present.

While David's monograph spans a variety of historical, political, and cinematic concerns, it maintains two distinct yet interlinked arguments. First, David reconsiders *Manila* and Bernal not through a simple divide between effective versus ineffective cultural practice but rather within a broader landscape of experimental cinema that emerged from the material circumstances of its social, historical, and political context. He explains that critics often misread Bernal's film in relation to those of other Filipino and Third World film practitioners, a tendency that often ignores the film's techniques and limits its reach (102). David's study points to *Manila*'s "flawed" narrative and thematic innovations as intentional, part of a vision that was much more coherent than its formal elements initially suggest (115). Related to David's argument is the fact that the book appears in the "queer film classics" series, and David considers *Manila* an inarguably queer film. Pushing back against the requisite to define queer in any one way, however, he contends that the utility of queer lies in its role as a conceptual category that refuses to be executed in neat packages (70). In other words, the film employs queerness not merely as a resistive ideology in the abstract: its narrative structure and technique constitute a queer critique of western cinema.

The monograph begins with a synopsis of the film and an introduction, followed by three chapters, and it ends with a conclusion and appendix (which includes a transcript of an interview between David and Bernardo Bernardo, the actor who played Manay in the film). In the introduction, David positions himself to describe the ways that his own professional coming-of-age progressed alongside the film's arrival, declaring, "As soon as I started the professional life that I had yet to fully chart, *Manila by Night* was ready to mark my steps" (17). He notes

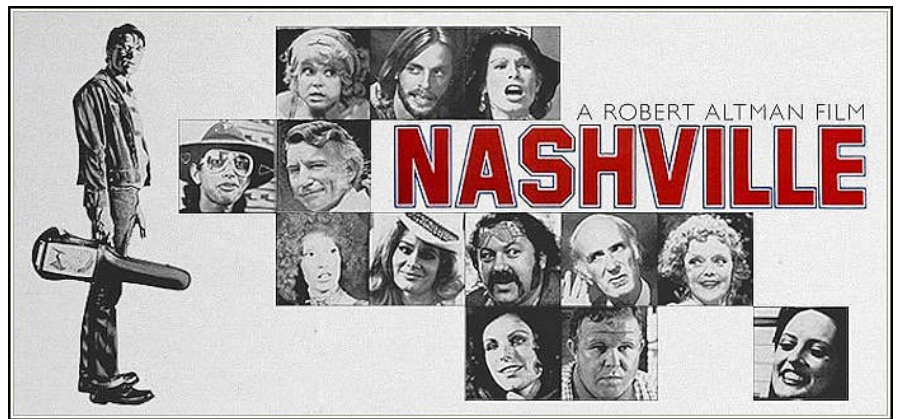




Struggling against the dictatorship's censorship mandates, Bernal changed the title of the film to *City after Dark* to prepare it for international circulation.

that Bernal tasked him to prepare the English subtitles for *Manila's* Berlinale screening (18-9). The younger David found the film not “a pretty sight, but it was electric, erotic, vulgar, violent, dangerous, and loving,” a description that aptly captures his own analysis of the film’s contradictions and complexity (18). Here, David commits himself to a kind of reflexivity, which he later also identifies as a critical part of Bernal’s technique. I read this authorial self-positioning as an important feature of David’s project, as it points to both his personal experience with the film—which informs a portion of his reading of it—and the impact that the film had in the Philippines at the time of its circulation. That the film provided a backdrop for David’s work as a critic and scholar illuminates its longevity within and significance to Philippine cinema. This introduction sets the groundwork for David’s reading of the film beyond its apparent messages or failures. It points to the palpability of the film and its role as a cultural setting for Manila’s own progression.

David’s study is committed to interdisciplinarity, a necessary method to capture the film’s sprawl. He draws from film theory, cultural studies, and Philippine history, which together expand the horizon for situating and reading *Manila*. He cites U.S. film scholar David Bordwell’s “poetics of cinema,” for instance, to describe the different ways that a film might be considered. Drawing from Bordwell, David writes that a poetics of cinema accounts for an analytic method that attends to the filmic material, a historical method that situates the film within a specific period and setting, and a study of audience response, which gauges viewers’ receptiveness and reading strategies (79). Further, he refers to Bill Nichols’s text on documentary technique to draw attention to the ways that Bernal employs “documentary textuality” to uncover the “actual texture of history” (100). Bernal himself identified Robert Altman’s *Nashville* (1975) as an inspiration for *Manila* (100-1), and David discusses the specificity and uniqueness of *Nashville*’s multiple-character format and audio-visual technique to delineate where Bernal drew from Altman and where he departed from him.



Robert Altman's *Nashville* (1975) served as a major influence for Bernal's *Manila*.

## A multiple-character film

Since many *Jump Cut* readers have not seen the film and much of David's analysis depends on the characters' complex interactions, I offer here a brief summary of *Manilla by Night*'s storyline. The film follows a series of diverse and interconnected characters as they navigate the temptations, difficulties, delights, and turbulences of the capital city. Taking place over the course of several nights, the film's characters include Vergie, a middle-class housewife who struggles with her past as a sex worker. She discovers that her eldest son, Alex, is using drugs. Throughout the film, Alex struggles with his drug addiction, eventually loses his girlfriend, Vanessa, and engages in a brief affair with Bea, a blind masseuse, whose partner, Greg, travels to Saudi Arabia in search of work. Bea's girlfriend is Kano (a contraction of "Amerikano" or American, which is a slang term that denotes a white man), a queer, mixed-race drug peddler who eventually betrays Bea by promising her sexual services to Alex and others. Kano, however, believes Bea to be their true love, often reminiscing with her about their former lives near the U.S. military base in Olongapo. We later find Adelina and Febrero in the home that they share with Adelina's two children. Adelina arrives home every evening from her apparent nightshift as a nurse at a local hospital, and Febrero works as a taxi driver. Febrero, however, is also in a relationship with Manay, a gay escort, and Baby, a young waitress. Adelina has deluded her friends and family into thinking that she works as a nurse when she actually works as a sex worker for

mostly Japanese clients. In the end, Vergie and her husband kick Alex out of the house for his drug use. Greg returns from Saudi Arabia to Bea only to attempt to deceive her into performing live sex shows for money. The police eventually apprehend Kano, and an unknown assailant murders Adelina on her way home from her job. As the film ends, Alex is left roaming the streets of Manila until he eventually lies down in a park. Throughout the film, the characters wrestle with the power of the urban landscape to alter, shape, and determine their lives.



The film closes with Alex lying in the park, which some critics have described as the film's inconclusive ending.

As can be seen in the film's narrative complexity, David centers his analysis of *Manila* on the significance of the multiple-character film, paying close attention to the genre's various uses over time and across space. His overview of the milieu movie, group film, and smorgasbord technique, for instance, explores the multiple-character format across historical vicissitudes as well as its deployment in distinct social contexts. David rejects Robin Wood's dismissal of the multiple-character film as merely emblematic of disaster films and high school teen movies (90-1) to align his analysis with Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner's discussion of the group film as metonymy, which allows "the spectator to regard a film [for its] open-endedness, distantiation, generic playfulness, and demythologization within mainstream film undertakings" (92-3). David contends that Filipino moviegoers have long been receptive to multiple-character films due to the influence of the Catholic Church's iconography. He writes that the

"element of multiplicity comes in when we consider the spectacle available in the major traditional churches: the *retablos* ... or altar pieces, reminiscent of Mexico, where 'the foci were the niches containing the *santos*'" (81).

The discussion here is brief, David acknowledging that such a reading may be "too literal," but I find these points effective for articulating the multiple-character format as a multidirectional medium that allows the Filipino audience to engage with cinema from different points of entrance.





The film's multiple-character style seen through the intersecting conflicts between characters (here, Manay, Bea, and Bea's helper).

David argues that Bernal's multiple-character strategy goes beyond a simple refusal of the single protagonist form but also experiments with documentary aesthetics and sound in ways that seek to address social issues such as the intricacy of state violence, neocolonialism, and gender and sexuality during the martial law era. David writes that Bernal uses

"hand-held cameras, improvised scenes, noise-filled soundtracks comprising pointedly observed inner-city chatter, snatches of industrial and pop music sounds, and (a holdover from his earlier work, *Nunal sa Tubig*) indeterminate closures" (49).

He posits that Bernal's filmography reveals a careful exploration of the medium as well as a willingness to challenge audience preferences and censorship limits (47). David writes that Bernal's "crowd" narratives mimicked the "fly[-on-the-wall] aesthetic of keenly observed documentaries" to provide the specificity of Manila's urban setting (49-50). For David, Bernal's technique emerged alongside and in contrast to the proliferation of western cinematic technologies in neighboring Asian countries. Pointing to Bernal's earlier film *Aliw* (1980) as *Manila's* prequel, David argues that Bernal determined that the documentary aesthetic was the most suitable method for matching western-sourced technology with third world realities.

With *Manila*, Bernal developed what David identifies as a "queering of technique" that employed reflexivity and sound and music innovations. The former, drawn from anthropological attempts to address research biases, includes the placement of reminders within the film of media's artificiality. In *Manila*, this emerges as a series of in-jokes within the film as well as an acknowledgement of the prominence of the film industry within the city (102-6). Bernal also crafts sound techniques that artificially constructed documentary "noise." For David, the multiplicity of sound allows the film's characters to speak in different ways and to a variety of concerns. The film's sound and music, ranging from jazz to pop,

provide commentary on dialogue between characters (106-115).

David's discussion of Bernal's sound technique is important for grounding his larger argument around *Manila's* multiple-character format. According to David, some multiple-character films connect characters by happenstance, a move that relies upon interactions between a set of characters that are similar social types. It

“yields a text that introduces and possibly develops a group of people without allowing the viewer to find out how their social relationships function beyond their incidental connections with one another” (121).

In contrast, Bernal's film allows different characters from a variety of social backgrounds to interact with each other (121). David explains that the rise of “bold” films in the Philippines helped shape Bernal's practice. Here, he relies again upon careful attention to the history of Philippine cinema to contextualize Bernal's filmmaking, an effective method for situating *Manila* within a broader landscape. Bold films relied not upon a single prominent actor but introduced a set of new actors within one film. In these films, a character's story does not unfold apart from the rest of the stories; rather, the films maximize the characters' interactions in shared scenes instead of favoring one character over another.

This “crowding” facilitates character development and allows each character to remain distinct from the crowd. In this way, David explains, individual resolutions build up to the “personal is political principle,” where private and professional concerns overlap. Such films often pointed to the intimacies and difficulties of sex work without relying too heavily upon the dialectic unfolding of Marxist logic. David argues that this multiple-character strategy allows society itself to function as a character (133). This is a noteworthy point, for as much as the characters occupy the film, their interactions are interspersed with careful shots of Manila's hectic streets, its brawls between characters, and the lights and sound of its discos. David contends that the film also saturates Manay and Kano—the film's identifiably queer characters—within the city so that they become indistinguishable from the city itself. Manay operates as the city's conscience (149), and where Kano is the subversive signifier, Manay is the foil and herald (153).



The film's identifiably queer characters, Kano and Manay. For David, Kano is the subversive signifier, and Manay is the foil and herald.

I read David's analysis of the multiple-character format as an important acknowledgement of the Marcos regime's logic of development and modernization. This logic was especially bent on order and cleanliness and, as the

first lady often pronounced, on the principles of truth, beauty, and goodness. Insofar as film itself was especially important to the regime's validation of power, Marcos-approved films often relied upon cinematic representations of Manila that affirmed these aspirations of order. David's argument that Bernal relies upon the multiple-character format for *Manila* also points to Bernal's own brand of anti-martial law resistance, an insistence to "crowd" Manila with its varied characters and lives in the face of the regime's efforts to clean and clear it. Indeed, David contends that the film

"does more than merely fragment traditional notions of character. The resultant reliance on types facilitates the move away from concepts of property and money economy associated with modern capitalism and toward the Western reader's postmodernist realities of corporate individualities" (156).

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Philippine politics and filmmaking



The Marcoses

David places *Manila* in historical context, locating it within a discussion of the significance of film to national consciousness and identity and within a history of Marcos's martial law period in the Philippines. David writes that film was instrumental to the U.S. colonization of the Philippines and that

“the US had already successfully deployed photography and then film as its most effective means of convincing the skeptical American public of the justifiability of colonizing the Philippine islands” (31).

More than only an instrument of colonial rule, however, film also emerged as a vehicle “by which Filipinos could indicate their preference for a dominant language” (33) and construct a national identity. As such, David articulates Philippine cinema as a multivalent medium that has illustrated the ongoing struggle between colonization and decolonization.

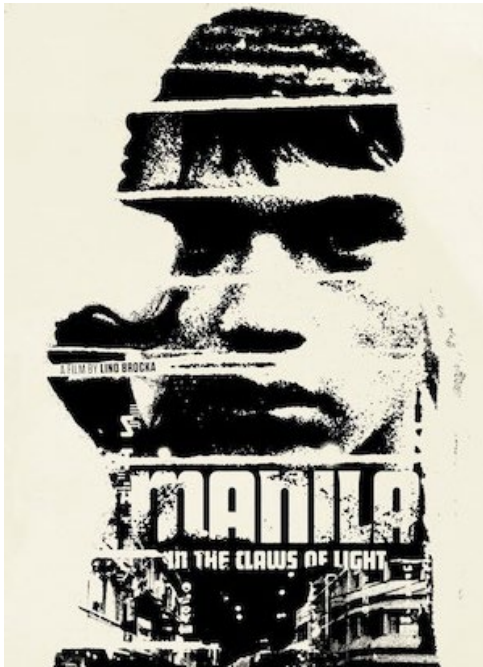
David describes the First Golden Age of Philippine cinema (the 1950s) as one of repression facilitated by the monopolization of production under the country's three largest film companies. Yet, it is the Second Golden Age (1975-1986) that occupies much of his attention. He writes that it is during this period when “the Philippines had one of the most active film industries in the world in absolute terms,” and by 1983, “Filipinos were ranked as the most active moviegoers in the world” (36). The Second Golden Age saw the rise of the Marcoses, the period of martial law, the confluence of politics and film, and the implementation of severe censorship strictures. David notes that Sampaguita Pictures became an arm of the president's propaganda programs, and Marcos's censorship board severely restricted filmmakers' capacities and visions. In an important move, David juxtaposes Marcos's declaration of martial law on September 21, 1972 with the passage of Executive Order No. 770 and the creation of the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines body. In doing so, he ties the regime's authoritarianism to its use of cinema as a medium for its power (39). Fewer studies have delved into this connection, and this point sets *Manila* squarely within the political landscape of martial law.[2] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

Almost paradoxically, the period also saw the rise of *bomba* or soft-core pornography films, which the Marcos regime sanctioned in an attempt to arouse public disgust over pornography and legitimize the regime's reconstruction of Philippine society. According to David, the president's censorship mandates deeply affected *Manila*'s production, release, and reception. When the Interim Board of Censors for Motion Pictures initially banned *Manila*, Bernal appealed to the censors by inserting a coda into the film's final sequence to explain to the audience that the characters achieved personal redemption when they finally disavowed their lives of sin. The film's censored title, *City After Dark*, served as a concession to First Lady Imelda Marcos and her demand that Manila be detached from any negative press. David's discussion helpfully situates *Manila* as a byproduct of the *bomba* tradition. It also attributes the somewhat jagged nature of the film to the board's censorship of these sex scenes. For David, it is this context that remains integral for understanding Bernal's practice and portrayals of Filipino life.



Bomba film star, Pepsi Paloma

Beyond offering a mere historical outline of Philippine cinema, David's discussion of the First Golden Age and the Second Golden Age pays attention to the overlaps between the eras in a way that also contextualizes the current period of Philippine cinema. In identifying the tropes, techniques, and formalities that appeared in



*Manila in the Claws of Light*, dir. Lino Brocka

later post-*Manila* films, David points to the momentous influence that Bernal and *Manila* had on contemporary filmmakers, a critical point that is often lost in critiques of the film's flaws (140-4).

Throughout the book, David positions Bernal with and against Lino Brocka, the other prominent Filipino filmmaker of the period and Bernal's "friendly rival." Specifically, David delineates the differences between the two filmmakers and compares their two films, Bernal's *Manila* and Brocka's *Maynila sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* (*Manila in the Claws of Light*) (1975): "Both were epic-scale productions that summon the capital city by name and purport to examine its unstable mélange of native and Western cultures" (60). Any conversation about the Second Golden Age often revolves around Bernal and Brocka, and it is no wonder: critics identify them both as queer filmmakers who died before they could realize the immensity of their influence. For David, however, such a discussion about the two merits more careful analyses. In David's estimation, Brocka garnered more accolades for *Maynila*, and Bernal struggled more readily with the debilitating strictures of the censorship bureau, and his efforts were mistaken for sloppiness. David is clear that this discrepancy in attention often marks *Manila* as unfinished and open-ended and *Maynila*, with its linearity and conventional form, as the former's finer obverse. Further, while critics and audiences understand both men as queer filmmakers, David contends that they employed queerness differently in their films: Brocka's attempts to incorporate queer characters and themes in his film was riddled with the filmmaker's own anti-queer sentiments (66-8). Bernal, on the other hand, constructed an analytic for considering gender and sexuality through a conceptualization of patriarchal power. David attributes Bernal's treatment of gender and sexuality to the filmmaker's upbringing in a matriarchal household.



Critics often compare Bernal to another notable Filipino queer filmmaker, Lino Brocka, the director of *Maynila sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* (1975).

David's comparison of the two filmmakers plays an important role in his analysis of *Manila*, and he adopts this comparative approach as inevitable. He notes that "*Manila by Night* was many of the best things *Maynila* had been, and many other things that *Maynila* had failed to become" (53). Here, David deploys a compare-and-contrast logic that elevates Brocka to attention only to dismiss him. I find his lengthy discussion of *Maynila*'s "trimmed" scenes ineffective for this reason (62-9). David argues that Brocka's films deploy overdetermined Marxist portrayals of class struggles while Bernal's films offer more thoughtful, nuanced queer critiques. I read this point as constructing Marxist criticism and queer theory as oppositional analytics, a notion that does not necessarily add to David's reading of *Manila* as a queer film. Further, in a footnote, David writes that it might be "up to scholars of gender to tease out" whether Bernal's "boisterous, catty, inclined to camp, and effeminate" persona and Brocka's "formal, reserved, and masculine" performance as well as his "phase of being 'discreet'" affected their respective film practices. In other words, David attributes the queerness of *Manila* and *Maynila* to Bernal's and Brocka's embodied performance of queerness. While David relegates this point to an afterthought, it is a notion that appears to influence his reading of the two filmmakers and merits a more extended discussion.

Might there be other ways to read Bernal and Brocka that do not situate them in opposition to each other? Might there be other ways to read the two filmmakers as wrestling with gender and sexuality in ways that are not relegated to their differing performances of queerness? In the end, David posits that if comparisons



will continue to be made between Bernal and Brocka—and it seems that this is the case—it is important to make the right kinds of comparisons. That is, the simple divide between the irresolution of *Manila* and the neatness of *Maynila* ignores the deliberateness of Bernal’s practice as well as the complexity of the filmmakers themselves.[3]

## Conclusion

Ultimately, David identifies the intersections between third cinema and queer critique, and it is at this crux that the book holds the most promise. David writes that the “queerness in *Manila by Night* resides as much in its politicization of so-called perverse sexualities as it does in its reconfiguration of film form in order to critique conventional heroes” (144-5) and that the film sets multiple queer characters against the heroic patriarchal figure (156). The figure of the hero, of course, is not only a critical element in literary and cinematic texts. It also functions as an important trope for “official” colonial and state narratives. David’s earlier mention of Dean Worcester’s and Thomas Alva Edison’s early photographs and films points to the ways that such modes constructed “crude and propagandistic anti-Spanish and anti-Filipino material” (31) that positioned Filipinos as the objects of U.S. colonial governance and envisioned colonists as the heroes of a new imperial order.[4] Moreover, as the father and mother of the nation—its biggest stars—the Marcoses offered to the Filipino people heroes against which they could measure themselves. In this way, the hero also always functions through normative conceptions of gender and sexuality, necessary for the reproduction of the story, the nation, and the empire. It is this conventional hero, this heroic patriarchal and paternalistic figure, that is the object of Bernal’s critique in *Manila*. David’s identification of this figure in the film underscores Bernal’s treatment of gender and sexuality as mediums for cultivating an anti-martial law and anticolonial politics within his film.

In other words, it is not that the film’s queer characters make the film instantaneously resistive, David proposes, but that the multiplicity of Bernal’s cinematic practice destabilizes the singularity of any one experience of inhabiting the world of the city (and the world that holds the city). David does not seek to uphold a series of binaries—the protagonist and antagonist, the hero and anti-hero—but strives to chart a method for identifying the strategies by which a hero is made and can be unmade.[5] Manay says it best in the film when he explains to Bea that it is difficult to trust people, as they wear different masks for every situation. He contends that it is important, then, to “make my own questions” and “answer them myself.”

David’s book is an attentive and sharp study of *Manila by Night* as well as Bernal’s artistry that reinvigorates the continued importance of the film almost 40 years after its release. In 2019, as the global right takes shape in old and new ways, David’s analysis urgently insists upon the importance of cultural production, queer technique, and historical analysis to identify avenues for materializing grounded criticism. In other words, David commands an understanding of Bernal’s film as a composite of strategies for working through and battling against the repressiveness of authoritarianism. David points to Bernal’s film not as allegory for any universal truth but as a project in ingenuity, an attempt to illustrate the complexity of Filipino life. Or as David explains, the film explains that “for all its broken dreams, Manila will continue to endure as it has in the past” (114).

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## Notes

1. See Jonathan Beller's "Third Cinema in a Global Frame: Curacha, Yahoo!, and Ishmael Bernal's Manila By Night" (*positions* 9.2 (2011): 331-367), Robert Diaz's "Queer Love and Urban Intimacies in Martial Law Manila" (*Plaridel* 9.2 (2012): 1-19), and Rolando Tolentino's "Marcos, Brocka, Bernal, City Films, and the Contestation for Imagery of Nation" (*Kritika Kultura* 19 (2012): 115-138). [[return to page 1](#)]
2. In this way, I think of David in conversation with Talitha Espiritu's *Passionate Revolutions: The Media and the Rise and Fall of the Marcos Regime* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017). [[return to page 2](#)]
3. Robert Diaz's discussion of "sexuality" within Asian American studies is particularly useful here. He writes that "examining the history of sexuality entails mapping its relationship to knowledge production, to normalized modes of behavior, and to reified subjectivity" ("Sexuality" from *The Routledge Companion to Asian American and Pacific Islander Literature*, edited by Rachel C. Lee, 140).
4. The University of Michigan's Worcester collection is a good place to start to delve into this history: <https://webapps.lsa.umich.edu/umma/exhibits/Worcester%202012/biography.html>.
5. See J.B. Capino's *Dream Factories of a Former Colony: American Fantasies, Philippine Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).







*Yellow Earth*, a movie that casts doubt on the ability of the CCP to help peasant families during the Communist revolution.



*Hibiscus Town* depicts the tragedy of an ordinary couple during the Cultural Revolution.

## From *March of the Volunteers* to *Amazing Grace*: the death of China's Main Melody movie in the 21st century

by [Shuk-ting Kinnia Yau](#)

Numerous Main Melody movies released in China since the millennium fall far short of achieving their original purpose as promoted by Deng Xiaoping. His idea of “the true, the good and the beautiful” has turned into a “golden goose” and “ecstasy pill” targeted for criticism by Xi Jinping in his 2014 Talk on Literature and Art. This paper discusses some of the most well-known Main Melody movies produced since 2000 and audience reception of these films, demonstrating how “party-state ideology” in them has either become the target of laughter and criticism or has been replaced or drowned out by commercial elements. Such elements have sometimes even transformed them into “anti-Main Melody” works, effectively signifying the death of the Main Melody as an ideal in the 21st century.

### Some history

In the early 80s, China embarked on a policy of reform and liberalization in reaction to the repression that had dominated policy over the previous two decades; newer leaders who came to power such as Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang advocated a more enlightened and open approach to government. Under the leadership of Hu as General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC)[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) from September 1982 to January 1987, people experienced a relatively higher degree of freedom and liberty in China. In cinema, films emerged that took a critical stance toward the CCP of the past, such as *Yellow Earth* (Chan Kaige, 1984) and *Hibiscus Town* (Xie Jin, 1986). However, within this atmosphere of expanded freedom of expression, massive student demonstrations broke out in seventeen large and medium-sized Chinese cities from late 1986 through early 1987. Protesters’ demands for “democracy, freedom, and human rights” and “no official profiteering or corruption” shocked the Beijing government.

On January 16, 1987, Hu was forced to resign from his position as Party General Secretary after holding his post for a mere four years. He was accused of preaching “bourgeois liberalization.” In the midst of the political struggle that followed, Deng Xiaoping, China’s *de facto* ruler, in 1987 called for adopting a policy of official support for *wenyi* (literature and art) that he characterized as “Main Melody” (*zhu xuanlü*). This art had to promote government-supported themes—in reaction to Hu’s perceived liberal excesses.[2] As noted by Yu (2013), “Main Melody” is a term that originates in music, corresponding closely to the notion of “leitmotif” in western classical music; it refers to a short, recurring theme that lends a musical composition its identity and character.[3] For Deng, this term indicated the didactic role that literature and art in general should play



Among the first foreign entertainment films allowed into China following the Cultural Revolution and normalization of relations with Japan, Japanese action thriller *Manhunt* (Sato Junya, 1976), starring Takakura Ken and Nakano Ryoko, created a huge sensation when it was first released in China in 1978.

to support CCP “party-state ideology.”[4]

The correlation between the birth of Main Melody cinema and Hu’s “resignation” has rarely been noted by scholars or critics. Instead they have tended to see this trend as simply following from China’s policy of curbing the proliferation of entertainment films.[5]



Starring Tanaka Kinuyo and Kurihara Komaki, *Sandakan No. 8* (Kumai Kei, 1974), a Japanese drama portraying the life of a Japanese prostitute in Sandakan (today’s Sabah, Malaysia), was also released in China in 1978 and enjoyed huge popularity among Chinese audiences.



Subsequent to Kurihara Komaki’s rise to fame in China, *Love and Death* (Nakamura Noboru, 1971), a Japanese romantic film starring Kurihara, was released in China in 1979.

In March 1987, a mere two months following the Hu’s downfall, the Film Bureau of the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) issued a pronouncement that Chinese film production teams should “promote the Main Melody while encouraging diversity.” According to Deng, “every film that promotes the true, the good and the beautiful is a Main Melody film.”[6] And Lian (2015) has even described Main Melody movies as “weapons” and “speakers” that “transmit the ideologies and values acknowledged by the CCP and the country in order to educate the public.”[7] Considered, however, in its contemporary political context, the whole idea of “Main Melody” can in fact be understood as initially constraining freedom of expression in reaction to the commercial liberalism that had developed in China in the wake of the neoliberal reforms promoted by Deng in the early 80s. Later, the concept was part of the CCP’s attempt to re-legitimize its authority following the 1989 crackdown. After the reunification of East and West Germany in November of that same year and the





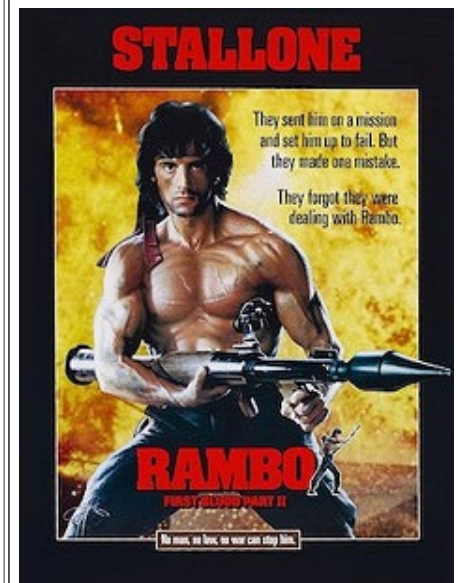
*Singin' in the Rain* (Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, 1952), was released in China in 1981, one of the first Hollywood entertainment films allowed into China from the U.S. following normalization of relations with the U.S..

dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the CCP regime was caught in an ever-tightening deadlock. At that point, its leaders increasingly viewed promoting Main Melody as an imperative for political survival.

Against this political and historical context mainland Chinese cinema over the past quarter century has been dominated by Main Melody genre. Films produced in this genre have attracted substantial scholarly attention both in China and in the West. [8] Films produced in this genre have attracted substantial scholarly attention, both in China and in the West. Many scholars of Chinese cinema have also agreed that Hollywood's influence has dominated China's market-driven film industry in the new millennium.



*Star Wars* (later retitled *Star Wars: Episode 4- A New Hope*) (George Lucas, 1977) was released in China in 1985, one of the earliest Hollywood SF fantasies seen by Chinese audiences.



*First Blood* (Ted Kotcheff, 1982) was released in China in 1985 and shocked Chinese audiences with its vivid and brutal depictions of violence.

With such a shift in the national market, Main Melody movies underwent a transformation, becoming “commercialized Main Melody films” or “commercial films with Main Melody characteristics,”[9] some writers praising such marketization in an era of worldwide economic recession.[10] These studies have without doubt contributed major insights into the historical development of the Chinese film industry; they usually begin with the Reform and Opening 40 years ago and extend through the period of the late 20th century continuing into the new millennium. This is the period of the marketization and globalization of Main Melody movies and of the Chinese film industry at large.

Some film scholars maintain that serving the state and integrating entertainment



with Party ideology continue to constitute the main purpose of Main Melody movies in the contemporary period.[11] I argue to the contrary: no matter how marketized Main Melody movies have become or how “main-melodized” commercialized films have become, Main Melody movies have in effect lost their capacity to promote “party-state ideology” in the way the CCP originally envisioned. In fact, the emergence of Main Melody characteristics in commercial films has even had the opposite effect, typified by the negative reception and poor box office performance that such films have seen in regions such as Hong Kong and Taiwan.[12] These trends are symptoms, in my view, of none other than the demise and death of the Main Melody genre.

Here I attempt to address these gaps in previous scholarship in the hopes of offering a more broadly accurate and comprehensive analysis of the current state of Main Melody movies—most importantly to explain what I view as their death. In sections that follow, I will first trace the origin and early development of Main Melody films to set the stage for the analysis I present in the subsequent main sections of the paper about such films’ eventual demise in the new millennium, with “party-state ideology” either becoming an element that turns off audiences—in some cases becoming a target for ridicule—or an aspect of the script that is replaced and ultimately drowned out by commercial elements and ideologies foreign to such ideology. Ironically, this latter development has been symbolized most potently by the appearance of a Christian narrative theme that structures the climax of the most commercially successful Main Melody film.

## Origins of the Main Melody movie genre

Upon becoming president in March, 2013, Xi Jinping announced his ambition to realize the dream of a “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” Since taking office Xi has repeatedly appealed to CCP members “not to forget our original intentions” (*buwang chuxin*). The phrase “original intentions” (*chuxin*), for example, appeared prominently in a recent speech delivered by him at the 19th National Congress of the CPC in October, 2017, where he argued for a “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” that will “help improve the livelihood of the Chinese people and bring about rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” A news article that appeared subsequently in the *Hong Kong Oriental Daily News* predicted that

“with the inauguration of the 19th National Congress of the CPC, there is no doubt that the Thought of Xi Jinping will be incorporated into the Party Constitution, officially empowering Xi as the ‘core’ of the CCP and elevating him to the same position of leadership in the CCP as [had been held by] Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping.”[13]

And in the United States, according to the list of the World’s Most Powerful People released by *Forbes* in 2018, Xi has surpassed Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin to become the most powerful person in the world.[14] That the influence of his thought would figure centrally in the evolution of China’s Main Melody policy is not a surprise.

An accurate understanding of the transformations that have taken place in China’s current Main Melody policy requires going back to a two-hour speech on literature and art delivered by Xi at the Beijing Forum on October 15, 2014.[15] Inheriting the spirit of Marxist–Leninism, particularly as manifested in a 1942 speech by Mao, “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art,” Xi assumed without question that literature and art should aim to promote the core values of socialism. However, he argues, after China implemented a policy of openness, literary works have come to be exploited as a “golden goose” for profit and success and an “ecstasy pill” for sensual stimulation, thereby ruining society with “cultural garbage” that is “shoddy,” “strained,” “obsequious to foreign cultures,” and “lacking in positive energy.” Xi emphasizes that literature and art should pursue “the true, the good, and the beautiful” instead of “*renminbi* (RMB),” and that the



Thirteen of the annual top grossing films in mainland China between 2000 and 2018 are Chinese films. Except for *Fatal Decision* (Yu Benzheng, 2000) which features “anti-corruption and striving for integrity,” and *Operation Red Sea* (Dante Lam, 2018) which features a “strong army,” the remaining films exhibit a focus on martial arts fantasy, romantic comedy and special effects. These characteristics were officially frowned on as “tastes of the petty bourgeoisie.”



Mao declaring the founding of the PRC at Tiananmen Square (*The Birth of New China*).

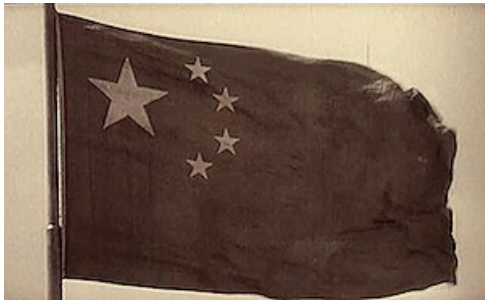
“Main Melody” character of literature and art should lie in “patriotism” more than in “economic benefit.” Such words clearly express Xi’s strong concern with a tendency toward over-commercialization[16] in current literature and art whereby the narrative arts have lost their function of “conveying truth through words,” and he calls for this situation to be remedied.



*Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons* (Stephen Chow and Derek Kwok, 2013) and *Monster Hunt* (Raman Hui, 2015) are frowned upon for challenging the official, traditional taboo against “promoting cults and superstition” (Pang 2011).

If the “Talk[s] on Literature and Art,” delivered by both Mao and Xi 72 years apart, emphasize written and visual art’s political rather than cultural significance, aimed at showcasing the might of ideology,[17] the “Main Melody movie” policy advocated by Deng in 1987 can be considered a follow-up measure aimed at “clarifying mastership [of literature and art]” and “securing governing power [through them].” Xi’s conception of literature and art as a tool for pursuing “the true, the good, and the beautiful” inherits Deng’s understanding of Main Melody: “every film that promotes the true, the good, and the beautiful is a Main Melody film.”

Widely regarded as the curtain-raiser of the Main Melody movement in



A soaring five-star Red Flag with the music of *March of the Volunteers* playing in the background (*The Birth of New China*).

cinema[18] is *The Birth of New China* (Li Qiankuan and Xiao Guiyun, 1989), produced by Changchun Film Studio, the first movie studio recognized by the PRC since its founding in 1949. That film was released nationwide on October 1, 1989, on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the founding of the PRC.[19] Not surprisingly, the movie features as its climax a scene where Mao and his fellows declare the founding of the PRC at Tiananmen Square in Beijing, followed by a scene prominently displaying a soaring five-star Red Flag against the background of the music of *March of the Volunteers*. Written by Tian Han and set to music by Nie Er, this was originally the theme song of the anti-Japanese film *Children of Troubled Times* (Xu Xingzhi, 1935) and was later selected as the national anthem of the PRC on September 25, 1949.[20]

## The Main Melody movie in the 90s

In May 1990, Jiang Zemin, General Secretary of the CPC, issued a statement in a letter to the Education Minister emphasizing the need to teach respect for the country and an understanding of contemporary Chinese history. The Ministry of Education immediately announced that schools would expand their teaching of Chinese history and Chinese. That same year, E'mei Film Studio produced the biographical film *Jiao Yulu* (Li Wenqi, 1990) commemorating Jiao Yulu, a communist revolutionary martyr considered a role model for all members of the CCP. In 1991, following efforts by Jiang to promote patriotism among Chinese youth, the August First Film Studio released the epic trilogy *Decisive Engagement* (Li Jun and Yang Guangyuan, 1991) portraying three critical battles in the Civil War between the KMT (Kuomintang)[21] and the CCP. This trilogy consists of *The Liaoxi Shenyang Campaign*, *The Wei Hai Campaign* and *The Beiping Tianjin Campaign*. Following up on this historical emphasis, 1992 saw *The Story of Mao Zedong* (Mao Mao, Han Sanping and Luo Xing, 1992) and *Zhou Enlai* (Ding Yinnan, 1992) released, both films praising the glory of the CCP's two top leaders. Beginning in 1993, patriotic education was vigorously promoted as a national policy, and all primary and secondary school students were required to watch patriotic movies as designated by the Minister of Education.



Movie poster depicting Deng Xiaoping as one of the top leaders in the Chinese Civil War (*Decisive Engagement*).



Film title written by Jiang Zemin in calligraphy(*Decisive Engagement*).





*The Story of Mao Zedong, a main melody film glorifying a top leader of the CCP.*



*Zhou Enlai, another main melody film glorifying a top leader of the CCP.*

In January 1994, Jiang, who by then had become President of the PRC, in a speech on the direction of literature and art delivered at the National Conference on Propaganda Work, reiterated the need to “promote the Main Melody while encouraging diversity” in a speech on the direction of literature and art delivered at the National Conference on Propaganda Work. Around the same time Hollywood blockbusters were let into the Chinese market for the purpose of improving declining audience numbers at domestic cinemas. In the mid-80s, television, pirated DVDs, and karaoke had become increasingly popular with a corresponding decrease annually in viewership of domestic films. By the early 90s, half of the national film production companies were in financial difficulty resulting in a 50% drop of mainland film productions. Beginning in November 1994, the Chinese government adopted an independent accounting system by which 10 foreign blockbuster films, most of which were Hollywood movies, could enter the Chinese market each year in order to boost box office income.[22]

In 1995 the patriotic education campaign was escalated. The political context then derived from a number of factors. There was widespread international criticism resulting from China’s decision to proceed with another nuclear test four days after 170 countries had agreed to the extension of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. In June of that year, former Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui had visited the U.S. on a “personal trip” during which he delivered a speech at Cornell University in which he allegedly advocated Taiwan’s separation from the motherland, causing an abrupt souring in cross-Straits relations that brought China and Taiwan to the brink of war.

Furthermore, relations with Japan were strained. On August 15, the Murayama Statement was released on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the war’s end in which Murayama Tomiichi, former Prime Minister of Japan ostensibly apologized to various countries in Asia for Japan’s actions in World War II. The key points of this statement lie, however, in the part of the statement that followed the apology: Murayama advocated “the ultimate elimination of nuclear weapons,” “strengthening of the nuclear non-proliferation regime” and “actively striving to further global disarmament.”[23] This was an obvious warning to China, which was pursuing nuclear development at the time. In the same month that this statement was published Japan for the first time suspended its program of financial aid to China (known as Official Development Assistance, ODA) in response to China’s aggressive nuclear testing. As a result, Japan’s grant aid to



*The July Seventh Incident, a 1995 main melody film depicting anti-Japanese themes.*



*Don't Cry, Nanking*, another 1995 main melody film depicting anti-Japanese themes.



*Black Sun: The Nanking Massacre*, a 1995 main melody film also with the Japanese as villains.

China dropped to 480 million yen in 1995 from a high of 7.79 billion yen in 1994. [24] In a related development, Qian Qichen, China's former foreign minister and vice-premier, had announced to the public in March 1995 that although China would not formally charge Japan for war crimes at the national level, the public could still file lawsuits against Japan seeking personal compensation. These actions negatively impacted the stable and friendly relations between China and Japan that had been in place since normalization of diplomatic relations in 1972. [25] In the face of various such internal and external political issues, subtle changes occurred in China's patriotic education program. Correspondingly, Main Melody films, which already placed an emphasis on the Party's historical contributions, began to highlight China's past as a victim of imperialism and the country's consequent need to "be armed" in preparation for any future foreign aggression.

In 1995 the PRC State Education Commission issued a list of 100 patriotic films that primary and secondary school students in China must watch. [26] Most of these critically depict China's invasion by the Great Powers or glorify CCP history. Examples include *The Naval Battle of 1894* (Nong Lin, 1962), a narrative of the First Sino-Japanese War, *Guerrillas on the Plain* (Su Li and Wu Zhaodi, 1955), describing the Anti-Japanese War, *Liu Hulan* (Feng Bailu, 1950), portraying the Chinese Civil War, *Shangganling* (Sha Meng and Lin Shan, 1956) and *Heroic Sons and Daughters* (Wu Zhaodi, 1964), both depicting the Korean War (called in China the "War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea"). In the same year several film premiered that mark the 50th anniversary of the end of the Anti-Japanese War, including *The July Seventh Incident* (Li Qiankuan and Xiao Guiyun, 1995), *Don't Cry, Nanking* (Wu Ziniu, 1995), and *Black Sun: The Nanking Massacre* (Mou Tun-fei, 1995), all of which focus on anti-Japanese themes.

Unlike previous Main Melody films that had focused on CCP revolutionary struggles and victories or on biographies of great leaders, these movies fully cooperated with the patriotic education campaign underway at that time. They emphasize a spirit of nationalism embodied in mottoes such as, "never forget the national humiliation," "put aside hatred but remember history," and "take history as a mirror." Exemplifying this is the long intertitle appearing at the beginning of the film *The July Seventh Incident*:

"The July Seventh Incident was an epoch-making historical event. The sounds of gunshots by the Japanese invaders at Lugou Bridge announced that the Chinese nation was facing the most dangerous period [of its history]. The great resistance effort against the occupiers at Lugou Bridge became a holy fire that ignited the spirit of the Chinese people. From that point on, the Chinese people took up the fight in an arduous eight-year war of resistance."

At the same time because Hollywood films had gained an overly large share of the domestic market box office revenue, from the mid-90s on, Main Melody films and Chinese films in general began to pay more attention to market considerations. [27] *Red Cherry* (Ye Daying, 1995) and *Kong Fansen* (Chen Guoxing, 1995) are two examples of Main Melody films that, rather than preach ideology, seek to move their audience through emotion.

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Based on a true story of two Chinese teenagers in Moscow during World War II, *Red Cherry* became China's biggest hit in 1995.



*Kong Fansen*, a biographical film about a beloved government official who dies in the line of duty.

Some critics find these films relatively more down-to-earth than Main Melody predecessors such as *The Creation of a World* (Li Xiepu, 1991) and *Decisive Engagement*, which more stiffly preach dogma. This new approach to narrative and tone brought about a reversal in fortunes of the Main Melody movies, earning them higher ratings and higher box office revenues.[28]

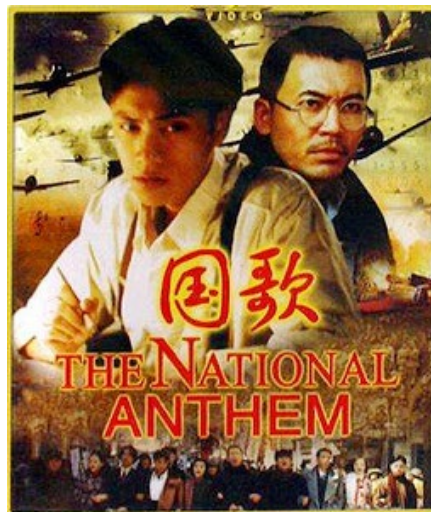
In 1999, a number of films were produced as part of the CCP's celebration of the PRC's 50th anniversary, including *The National Anthem* (Wu Ziniu, 1999), which narrates the birth of the song *March of the Volunteers*, later to become the national anthem, and *Lover's Grief over the Yellow River* (Feng Xiaoning, 1999), which depicts the resistance of the CCP's Eighth Route Army against the Japanese alongside the Americans during World War II.

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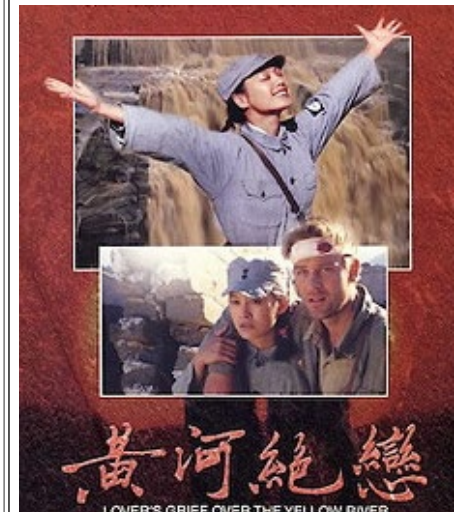




Featuring gorgeous Chinese landscapes and incorporating substantial location shooting in the Gobi Desert and Mount Cangyan, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is considered one of the greatest and most influential martial arts fantasy films in history.



*The National Anthem* narrates the birth of the song *March of the Volunteers*, later to become the national anthem.



*Lover's Grief over the Yellow River* depicts the resistance of the CCP's Eighth Route Army against the Japanese alongside the Americans during World War II.

Rather than adhere to the CCP's traditional denunciation of U.S. imperialism, *Lover's Grief over the Yellow River*, the second movie of Feng Xiaoning's "War and Peace" trilogy (the first and the third are *Red River Valley* in 1996 and *Purple Sunset* in 2001), goes to great lengths to depict friendly relations between China and the United States, with the script suggesting that differences between the two countries could be overcome by love.[29] In terms of the political background of the time, this film came out when China was attempting to enlist U.S. support to become a member of the WTO. This film was submitted by China to the 72nd Academy Awards for Best Foreign Language Film, where it failed to be nominated in the first stage of competition.

## 21st century: Main Melody movies in name only

In the early 2000s, together with its accession to the WTO, China's gross domestic product (GDP) increased dramatically, highlighting its rise to the status of a great power. In the footsteps of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* directed by Ang Lee in 2000, productions employing acting talent from multiple backgrounds and featuring gorgeous Chinese landscapes became trendy in China's movie industry. [30] An example of this is *Hero* (Zhang Yimou, 2002), the first domestic film to achieve earnings of over 250 million RMB (US\$ 37.78 million) at the box office; it pioneered a category of big-budget blockbuster films that came to be called *da pian* (big movie).[31] Since entering the new millennium, Main Melody movies



*Hero*, a martial arts fantasy film based on the story of an assassination attempt by Jing Ke on the King of Qin in 227 BC.



*The Founding of a Republic*, an all-star big budget film commemorating the PRC's 60th anniversary.



The promotional poster of *Cairo Declaration* highlighting Mao Zedong that became the target of criticism by netizens.

have likewise become more commercialized in line with this money making trend. Even in films produced to commemorate national history, the focus has shifted to all-star casts, suspenseful plots with surprising twists, and sex and violence.

Han Sanping—who served as Vice Chairman (since 1999) and Chairman (since 2007) of the China Film Group Corporation (CFGC)[32] and Chairman (since 2000) of China Film Co., Ltd. and who has directed a number of Main Melody movies—commented frankly on this trend:

“Undeniably, nowadays is an era of entertainment for everyone. Those who can entertain the public well are the ones who gain recognition and support from the masses, as well as box office success and positive reception. Similarly, the ones who can entertain the people are the ones capable of educating and guiding the public in an imperceptible way.”[33]

As the Chief Director of *The Founding of a Republic* (Han Sanping and Huang Jianxin, 2009), a film commemorating the PRC's 60th anniversary, he continued,

“A good movie should be able to motivate audiences to purchase tickets. Therefore, *The Founding of a Republic* should operate from a commercialized approach, and its workflow should be integrated on a market-oriented basis. It is not difficult to make a film that political leaders are satisfied with; however, to make audiences feel satisfied, it is the making of an 'enjoyable' film that we will take as our understood goal.”[34]

Han Sanping was the helmsman of the Main Melody initiative. That even he would make such comments bespeaks how completely Main Melody movies produced since the millennium have been transformed into commercial films. In practical terms they are not, as characterized by certain scholars, “commercialized Main Melody films” or “commercial films with Main Melody characteristics” that serve the state by promoting the Party's ideology.[35] In other words, since the beginning of the 21st century, Main Melody movies have arguably come to exist in name only, given that the “party-state ideology” behind these films has already become a significant foil for entertainment, a stumbling block hindering box office revenues, or even the target of laughter and criticism. *Cairo Declaration* (Wen Deguang and Hu Minggang, 2015), for example, a film commemorating the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II became the target of criticism by netizens in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan because of the appearance of the iconic Mao Zedong on its promotional posters, resulting in a meagre 9 million RMB (US\$ 1.36 million) box office. Some even suspected that the movie distorted history in order to please government leaders.[36]

Since the turn of the millennium, one of the motivations behind the production of Main Melody movies has been to attract talented individuals from Hong Kong and Taiwan to the mainland film industry and at the same time to strive for film awards and box office earnings in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Clearly, such talented individuals are not invited to “reform” Main Melody movies; rather, they are part of an effort to convert the entire Chinese film industry to a commercially successful one, more like Hollywood. Thus, directors such as John Woo, Johnnie To and Stephen Chow, who had previously established reputations in Hollywood and the West, are invited from Hong Kong as part of China's effort to have them direct films in the mainland. This policy has had highly successful results, though their films do not have Main Melody storylines.[37] Furthermore, due to widespread commentary on the Internet, audiences at large have become averse to films that preach political or other propaganda and advise each other which films to watch and which to avoid. As noted by Zhang Dongtian, professor at the Beijing Film Academy, “Nowadays, audiences watch *24* and *Prison Break* (both U.S. television dramas) almost every day. There are no thrillers that they have not seen before.”[38] That is to say, in contrast to the previous approach of giving first priority to politics, many commercially successful Main Melody movies in recent

years have become no different in character from entertainment films in general.  
[39]

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



*The Message*, an adaptation of Mai Jia's best-selling spy novel in commemoration of the PRC's 60th anniversary.

## The Taiwan connection

The Taiwanese producer/director Chen Kuo-fu is one of the best examples of a commercially successful producer of Chinese-language cinema. After becoming head of the production unit of the Asian branch of Columbia Pictures in 1999, Chen participated in the planning of Chinese-U.S. co-produced blockbusters such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Kung Fu Hustle* (Stephen Chow, 2004). Between 2006 and 2013, Chen served as Chief Production Director of China's Huayi Brothers Media Corporation (HBMC),<sup>[40]</sup> [\[open endnotes in new page\]](#) a post that Huayi Brothers are rumoured to have spent four to five years persuading him to accept. Chen was involved as a producer in a number of blockbusters directed by Feng Xiaogang that each grossed over 100 million RMB (US\$ 15.11 million) in box office, including *Assembly* (2007), *Aftershock* (2010), and *Back to 1942* (2012). In 2011, Chen was selected by *Sanlian Lifeweek*, a well-known Beijing weekly, as one of the most influential figures in the Chinese film industry over the previous 20-years. His production, *If You Are the One* (Feng Xiaogang, 2008), the highest grossing film in the history of Chinese cinema until then, has come to be regarded as the “starting point of cross-Straits film exchange.”<sup>[41]</sup> It is estimated that by the end of 2013, the total box office generated by films Chen produced had reached 5.7 billion RMB. Of particular note is the considerable success achieved by *The Message* (Gao Qunshu and Chen Kuo-fu, 2009) in Hong Kong and Taiwan, an exception among Main Melody films.

*The Message* is an adaptation of a best-selling 2007 spy novel by Mai Jia commemorating the PRC's 60th anniversary. In addition to including disturbing scenes of violence, sex and torture that are not in the novel, the film completely omits original content about the Chinese Civil War. The film's two central figures, nicknamed “Old Ghost” and “Old Gun,” represent anti-Japanese comrades, rather than the novel's communist revolutionary martyrs, and the organization that they belong to is an underground anti-Japanese group, not specifically affiliated with the CCP. In an interview published in the *China Film News*, Chen Kuo-fu confesses,

“When raising money for and shooting *The Message*, we did not regard it as a Main Melody movie. In fact, I am not a professional filmmaker of Main Melody films, and I am not sure how to satisfy the demand for movies in this genre. What I do know is that the spy film is a special genre that has the potential to successfully combine the Main Melody genre with commercial elements such as suspense, thrill, violence, and even brutality that are frequently featured in advertising commercial movies. At the same time, these features are often tied to national sentiments, embodying the glory of humanity and the power of faith in a special historical context.”<sup>[42]</sup>

At the end of the film, Gu Xiaomeng (“Old Ghost”), played by Zhou Xun, leaves her best friend these dying words:

“I am leaving these words in the hope that Sister Yu and my family will forgive my decision. But I have faith that you will come to understand my intentions. My dearest and beloved ones, I am being so heartless to you. It's all because our people are facing the greatest peril. I would do anything to stop it, even if it is giving up my life. My body will soon disappear, but my soul will always live on with you. What the enemy can never understand is that ‘Old Ghost’ and ‘Old Gun’ represent not

individuals; they represent a spirit, a faith.”

This message, created not by the novelist but by the screenwriters (Chen Kuo-fu and Zhang Jialu), converts the conflict between Chinese’s CCP and Taiwan’s KMT into a rivalry between “Chinese people” and “enemies.” “Spirit” and “faith” in this message represent not a political ideology, but the sentiment of being unwilling to witness the demise of one’s nation. Chen (2009) goes so far as to see in *The Message* “an attempt to chart a course of change in the narrative of revolutionary history, a transformation from victory of the ‘Party’ to victory of ‘Humanity.’”[43] The beginning of the film also weaves together controversial historical background in a skilful way, saying,

“During the Sino-Japanese War, Wang Jingwei, Vice President of the KMT, secretly negotiated with the invading Japanese army and declared a new Nationalist government in Nanking. Wang established command centers in various enemy-occupied areas, brutally persecuting those who fought against the Japanese. Since then, China had embarked on an era of wars and threats, both internally and externally.”

It is clear that the so-called “enemy” in this movie not simply the Japanese, but Wang Jingwei, who secretly collaborates with foreign forces, persecutes the



*The Knot* depicts a cross-Strait love relationship that lasted for 60 years.



Liu Ye in the role of a KMT soldier in *City of Life and Death*.

people, and sacrifices the country's sovereignty in the name of a "new Nationalist government." Also noteworthy is how Li Ningyu, a character played by Li Bingbing who is at first an ally of Wang's government, ends up regretting betraying her people but is eventually forgiven by "Old Ghost" and "Old Gun." As a blockbuster Main Melody movie, *The Message* does not celebrate the glory of the CCP in a high-profile way but instead secretly transforms conflicts between the CCP and the KMT into a collective aspiration embodying the hope that everyone will ultimately unite to fight against forces that divide the country, implicitly advocating the tactics of a united front.

In April 2005 former KMT chairman Lien Chan paid an eight-day private visit to mainland China to meet with Hu Jintao, the paramount leader of China from 2002 to 2012. The two issued a "Five Points Common Vision" joint statement, agreeing that in the spirit of the 1992 Consensus, they would encourage reopening talks across the Strait. The meeting was the highest-level exchange between the KMT and the CCP since the Chinese Civil War and the first case of a KMT chairman to visit mainland China since 1949. In order to support a "journal of peace," in September 2005 the CCTV (China Central Television) broadcast the epic war drama *Drawing Sword*, which took a rare approach of appreciating how the Nationalist army resisted the Japanese. In the following year China extended an unprecedented invitation to the Taiwanese Longxiang Film Company and the Taiwanese actress Vivian Hsu to star in the Main Melody film *The Knot* (Yin Li, 2006), which depicts a cross-Strait love relationship that lasted for 60 years. The screenplay, written by the famous writer Liu Heng, combines traditional revolutionary topics with elements of teen idol culture for the purpose of appealing to young viewers. In May 2008, a year before the screening of *The Message*, Ma Ying-jeou, former leader of the KMT, was elected president of Taiwan, ending an eight-year period of governance by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). While the former president Chen Shui-bian was in office, his open attitude of support for Taiwan independence had been regarded by the CCP as a cause of division within the country. Upon Ma being sworn into office, however, the CCP immediately embarked on a policy of "panda diplomacy," offering two pandas to Taiwan, named "Tuan Tuan" and "Yuan Yuan" (*tuanyuan* means union in Chinese), an explicit expression of its hopes for progress toward a united front. Furthermore, on December 31, 2008, Hu attended a symposium to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the publication of "Speaking to Taiwanese Compatriots," expressing his wish to cooperate with Taiwan and improve cross-Strait relations.

In the wake of these political developments, Main Melody have ceased to vilify the KMT in its portrayals. In the commemorative film *City of Life and Death* (Lu Chuan, 2009), for example, efforts are made to highlight the fact that the Chinese soldiers who desperately resisted the Japanese invasion, including the central character played by Liu Ye, were actually members of the KMT 36th Division led by Song Xilian. Liu is an actor with a highly positive image among Chinese audiences, having played the young Mao Zedong in *Beginning of the Great Revival* (Han Sanping and Huang Jianxin, 2011) and *The Founding of an Army* (Andrew Lau, 2017), following in the shoes of other well-known actors such as Gu Yue and Tang Guoqiang who have also played the role of Mao for years. Though disparaged by some, such as the Taiwanese writer Li Ao, as a "lackey general," however, Song Xilian is mentioned positively in *City of Life and Death* for his close relationship with the CCP subsequent to the Chinese Civil War.







Liu Ye in the role of Mao Zedong in *Beginning of the Great Revival*.



Liu Ye in the role of Mao Zedong in *The Founding of an Army*.

Released in the same year as *City of Life and Death*, *The Founding of a Republic* contains a scene from the Chongqing Negotiations, the final meeting between Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong (played by Zhang Guoli and Tang Guoqiang, respectively) that probably best illustrates the idea of a “united front.”[44] In that scene, Chiang and Mao appear before a party flag of the KMT and a poster of Sun Yat-sen to meet reporters. A reporter from the *Central Daily News* (a fictional character played by Sun Honglei) breathlessly opens the scene as follows.

“REPORTER: I am from the *Central Daily News*. I notice that both Chairman Chiang and Mr. Mao are wearing Mandarin suits. On a special day like today, is there a special meaning to that?

CHIANG: The Mandarin suit is the official attire for all civil servants of the Nationalist government. As the Chairman of the KMT, it’s my duty to welcome Mr. Mao to Chongqing. I’m wearing a Mandarin suit out of respect.

MAO: Chairman Chiang and I are both Dr. Sun’s disciples. Both the KMT and the CCP have inherited Dr. Sun’s revolutionary legacy. We share the same roots. It’s only natural that Dr. Sun’s disciples should wear Mandarin suits.

REPORTER: (Seeing both of them acting so respectfully to each other, the reporter excitedly asks another question about whether the two Parties will reach any consensus on political and military issues.)

MAO: Definitely, if you look hard enough. This reporter has already noticed that we have something in common.”

In reality, Hu Jintao and Ma Ying-jeou, the new generation of the paramount leaders of the CCP and the KMT, respectively, highlighted not only the idea of “same clan and origin,” championed by Sun Yat-sen, but also had in common an



Chiang and Mao appearing before a party flag of the KMT and a poster of Sun Yat-sen to meet reporters in Chongqing (*The Founding of a Republic*).



Mao arguing for the importance of being prepared for danger in peace time (*The Founding of a Republic*).



Tian Han expressing his desire to keep the lyrics of *March of the Volunteers* unchanged (*The Founding of a Republic*).

“enemy” intent on tearing the country apart. In this film, the common enemy is Li Zongren, acting president of the Republic of China.[45] This becomes apparent in the latter part of the movie, where Chiang Kai-shek repeatedly tells his son Ching-kuo that “negotiations with the CCP, dubbed by Li Zongren the ‘Southern and Northern Dynasties,’ cannot be successful because no one is able to take responsibility for the crime of breaking the country apart.” Just like Wang Jingwei in *The Message*, the great villain in *The Founding of a Republic* is similarly a traitor to the Nationalist government. It is difficult not to associate this villain with the former Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui or the DPP, a party taking a totally opposite view on cross-Straits policies to that of the KMT.

*The Founding of a Republic* is often critically regarded as achieving a successful evolution in the style of Main Melody films; it is entertaining, has approachable characters, and provides a successful model for subsequent imitation. Such cinematic advancements seemed to indicate a breakthrough and move beyond the marginalization previously plaguing Main Melody movies. Nevertheless, of the film’s over 170 Chinese, Hong Kong and Taiwan movie stars, many of those stars were also regarded as foreign nationals from Britain, the U.S., France, Japan, Thailand, etc. Due to the mixed nature of *The Founding of a Republic*’s all-star cast, the film’s presentation of that great undertaking of founding a republic turned into a controversy over nationalities and degree of loyalty. Finally, in the way it was received, the entire film project was suddenly seen as a “spoof” filled with “black humour.”[46]

For this movie, Hong Kong action star Donnie Yen, renowned for his appearance in *Ip Man* (Wilson Yip, 2008), played the role of Tian Han, the lyricist who created the song *March of the Volunteers*. One of the important scenes features Mao and his CCP fellows discussing whether *March of the Volunteers* should be chosen as the national anthem, with some members taking the view that the lyrics “the Chinese nation is facing its most dangerous moment” do not fit the image of a “new China” and suggesting that the lyrics be revised; others voice the opinion that the original lyrics arouse people’s passions and are not old-fashioned at all. In the end, Mao reminds everyone of the importance of being prepared for danger in peacetime, and asks Tian to decide whether or not to change the lyrics. Pleasantly surprised, Tian responds that he will make no change. This scene symbolizes the significance of *March of the Volunteers* as the national anthem of a “new China” – to be prepared for danger in peace time, exactly in line with the ideals of governance repeatedly expressed by Hu Jintao.[47] Starting from the release of the first Main Melody movie, *The Birth of New China*, in 1989, and in Main Melody films subsequently released at 10-year intervals in commemoration of the founding of the PRC, including *The National Anthem* in 1999 and *The Founding of a Republic* in 2009, audiences are reminded of the irreplaceable status of the anthem *March of the Volunteers* as a symbol of Chinese national identity.

Following *The Founding of a Republic*, other films such as *Death and Glory in Changde* (Shen Dong, 2010), *The Flowers of War* (Zhang Yimou, 2011), and *Back to 1942* (Feng Xiaogang, 2012) all put emphasis on highlighting every effort made by the Nationalist army to resist the Japanese and the human qualities of Chiang Kai-shek and his fellows. Since Xi Jinping took office in March 2013, however, there has been a deterioration in cross-Straits relations, seen in the popular opposition in Taiwan to the proposed Economic Cooperation Framework

Agreement (ECFA) and the return of the DPP to ruling party status, particularly as manifested in the so-called “Sunflower Student Movement,”[48] the Shu Qi nationality controversy,[49] and the Chou Tzu-yu Taiwan Flag Waving Incident.[50] In a related development, Ma Ying-jeou, who originally had had a friendly relationship with the CCP, issued harsh criticism of the Main Melody film *Cairo Declaration* for distorting history: “It is a big joke to see Mao Zedong appear at the Cairo conference.”[51] As these incidents show, Main Melody movies were not ultimately successful in achieving the goal of a “united front” in Taiwan. In 2013, Chen Kuo-fu ended his relationship with Huayi Brothers and became independent. Subsequent to that, Main Melody films such as *The Founding of an Army* and *Our Time Will Come* (Ann Hui, 2017) once again revert to depicting the KMT in a negative way.

## The Hong Kong connection

From Hong Kong's perspective, the CEPA (Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement, first signed between China and Hong Kong in June 2003) has not surprisingly been regarded as a virtual panacea for boosting the Hong Kong economy, a great stride toward opening up the vast Chinese domestic market of 1.3 billion consumers.[52] Also, it has provided opportunities for Hong Kong filmmakers to move northward. The efforts of some directors even “bore fruit” as mainland media even declared some to be masters of the Main Melody genre. For example, the *People's Daily* published an article on January 13, 2015, praising Tsui Hark and Peter Chan as filmmakers who went northward and achieved the most remarkable success among their competitors, having gradually discovered audience needs and a correct balance between personal sentiments and mainstream values. The expectations mainland film companies have about Hong Kong directors is that they successfully work in a popular style that audiences are willing to accept. By recruiting “outsiders” to shoot films in a way that audiences like and at the same time having these directors shoot scripts permeated with ideology, this kind of filming approach should be able to achieve both successful marketization and indoctrination. Such a concept is similar to the strategy adopted by the Japanese during World War II of employing Shanghai filmmakers to produce “Greater East Asian films” embodying the Japanese spirit and exporting those movies to Asian countries and overseas Chinese societies. Ironically, both in the past and the present, with both the “Greater East Asian films” and the Main Melody ones, in terms of achieving commercialization and promulgating ideology, *Hollywood* movies served as the target of imitation and competition.[53]

An exemplary Hong Kong director in this regard is Peter Chan. Born in Hong Kong, Chan spent his early years in Thailand and the United States, returning to



*Bodyguards and Assassins*, a historical action film set on the eve of the 1911 Revolution, featuring popular stars such as Donnie Yen, Tony Leung Ka-fai, Leon Lai, Hu Jun, Fan Bingbing and Nicholas Tse.





Adapted from the history of the founding of the New Oriental Education & Technology Group Inc., *American Dreams in China* highlights the proud entry of three Chinese young men into the New York Stock Exchange and their revenge against humiliation by Americans.



*Infernal Affairs*, a film from which many features were borrowed in *The Silent War*, including advertising and filming style.

Hong Kong at the age of 21 to start a career in the film industry. In 1999, he was invited by the U.S. film studio Dream Works SKG to direct *The Love Letter*, and in 2000 he founded Applause Pictures Limited, through which he released *One Fine Spring Day* (Hur Jin-ho, 2001) and *The Eye* (Oxide Pang and Danny Pang, 2002), films that brought together talent from all across Asia. These experiences became a springboard for Chan to enter the Chinese market, and the Hong Kong musical he directed in 2005, *Perhaps Love*, became one of the most popular films of its time across China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Beginning in 2007, he shifted his attention to specifically target the mainland, directing and producing a series of films that garnered high acclaim and box office revenues, such as *The Warlords* (Peter Chan, 2007), *Protégé* (Derek Yee, 2007), *Bodyguards and Assassins* (Teddy Chan, 2007), *Dearest* (Peter Chan, 2014) and *Soul Mate* (Derek Tsang, 2016). *Bodyguards and Assassins* gained particular critical acclaim in China, being hailed in a December 29, 2009, article in the *People's Daily* as marking “a new direction for Chinese blockbusters.” Compared with the above works, *American Dreams in China*, directed by Chan in 2013, is even better known for exhibiting the features of a Main Melody movie.

This film, adapted from the history of the founding of the New Oriental Education & Technology Group Inc., ends with a scene featuring one of the male leads, Cheng Dongqing (played by Huang Xiaoming), using English to argue with a group of Americans who intend to sue him. It highlights the proud entry of Cheng’s company into the New York Stock Exchange and the revenge taken by him against Americans who have humiliated his friend, Meng Xiaojun (played by Deng Chao); he does that by sponsoring a biological sciences institute under the name of “Meng Xiaojun.” The dignified way Cheng avenges the insult of his friend is very much in line with current national priorities, exemplified by the goal of fulfilling the “Chinese Dream” and contributing to the revitalization of the nation promoted by Xi Jinping in a speech he delivered on November 29, 2012, during his visit to the “Road to Revival” exhibition.[54]

Peter Chan is only one of a large number of Hong Kong filmmakers who have been invited to the mainland to produce Main Melody movies. Examples of such films that ended in box office failure include *My War* (Oxide Pang, 2016), *God of War* (Gordon Chan, 2017) and *The Founding of an Army*. Commercially successful cases include *The Silent War* (Alan Mak and Felix Chong, 2012), *Extraordinary Mission* (Alan Mak and Anthony Pun, 2017), *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* (Tsui Hark, 2014), *Operation Mekong* (Dante Lam, 2016) and *Operation Red Sea* (Dante Lam, 2018). Apart from their success or failure in box office, all these movies have in common the portrayal of a “strong army,” which accounts for why Hong Kong directors, with their proven track record directing action films with special effects, have been sought after as directors for these films.

In *The Silent War*, for example, a film released in 2012, there is a scene in which a military representative of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) delivers a speech saying,

“In the past, we did not have an air force; we relied only on compact MK rifles to overthrow the Chiang government. Today, with the passage of time, political situations are changing constantly. In order to resist the invasion of imperialism, we must have our own air force. Otherwise we will always be passive. The air force is our future.”

This speech reflects China’s military goal in the 21st century to change from having a purely defensive to an offensive capability and to expand its military power so as to resist foreign forces.



From advertising to filming style, features reminiscent of *Infernal Affairs* can be seen throughout *The Silent War*.



*Wolf Warrior II*, a patriotic film inspired by the Belt and Road Initiative, stands out as an exceptional success compared to other movies of its kind promoting a "strong army."

The directors of *The Silent War*, Alan Mak and Felix Chong, are a combination well known for their production of the two Hong Kong film series, namely *Infernal Affairs* (Andrew Lau and Alan Mak, 2002-03) and *Overheard* (Alan Mak and Felix Chong, 2009-14). From advertising to filming style, features reminiscent of *Infernal Affairs* can be seen throughout *The Silent War*. For example, at the end of the movie, as everyone mourns for the heroine Zhang Xuening (played by Zhou Xun), He Bing (played by Tony Leung), whose eyes are covered with black silk, raises his hand in salute. In fact, that action is reminiscent of the salute of Chan Wing-yan (also played by Tony Leung) to his superior officer during the funeral march of the latter in *Infernal Affairs*. The difference between these two scenes is that the loyalty being shown in *Infernal Affairs* is to a member of what had been the Royal Hong Kong Police Force, established by the British colonial government before the handover, but in the case of *The Silent War* the salute, and thus the loyalty, are to the CCP, represented in the film by Zhang.



He Bing raising his hand in salute to a CCP martyr (*The Silent War*).



Chan Wing-yan raising his hand in salute to a member of the former Royal Hong Kong Police Force (*Infernal Affairs*).

In recent years, having a "strong army" has become a widely-accepted mainstream theme in Chinese culture and politics. Prior to the 19th National Congress of the CPC, the Political Work Department of the Central Military Commission went so far as to promote an eight-episode documentary series titled *Strong Army*, which was subsequently broadcast two episodes per night on the CCTV channel in September and October 2017. The series aims to highlight the historical achievements of military reform efforts and the development of the PLA under the leadership of Xi Jinping.

*Wolf Warrior II* (Wu Jing, 2017), a patriotic film inspired by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)[55] stands out as an exceptional success compared to other movies of its kind promoting a "strong army." The film achieved a record 6 billion RMB (US\$ 946.23 million) in box office, becoming the best-grossing movie ever in Chinese history.

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# JUMP CUT

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The actor criticized by Ye Daying for playing the role of his grandfather Ye Ting in *The Founding of an Army*.



The facial expression of He Bing in *The Silent War* raising questions about the sincerity of the directors of the film.

Despite an increasing number of Hong Kong artists participating in the production of Main Melody movies and an increasing degree of integration between the Chinese and Hong Kong film industries, social and political incompatibilities between Hong Kong and the mainland remain largely unresolved. People say, “Hong Kong citizens have not turned their hearts back to China,” even 20 years after the handover in 1997. This is reflected in the fact that most Main Melody movies that have achieved blockbuster success in mainland have failed to achieve box office success or positive social reception in Hong Kong. Some mainland directors have also expressed dissatisfaction with the attitude of certain Hong Kong filmmakers, as reflected in the critical remarks made by Gao Qunshu, the mainland director of *The Tokyo Trial*[56] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] and *The Message*: “I think the goal of most Hong Kong filmmakers who have come to the mainland is money. Taking advantage of their influence accumulated over time, they rush to the mainland to stake claims on the Chinese market.”[57] In other words, what can be seen in the so-called efforts toward cooperation between China and Hong Kong is probably something motivated solely by market profits.

Main Melody movies directed by Hong Kong directors, moreover, do not consistently exhibit Main Melody themes prominently, leading some critics to describe Hong Kong filmmakers who have moved northward as engaged in the “exchange of bargaining chips,” “enduring all disgrace and insult in order to accomplish their task,” and acting as “undercover cops” (*mou gaan dou* in Cantonese, a term originating in the Chinese title of *Infernal Affairs*). For instance, it is said that Andrew Lau originally intended to direct a film entitled *When Robbers Meet the Monsters* instead of *The Founding of an Army* but was forced to bow to pressure from the China’s Bona Film Group.[58] Presumably China would not invest in *When Robbers Meet the Monsters* unless Lau delayed it until after the completion of *The Founding of an Army*.[59]

*The Founding of an Army* is a 2017 movie commemorating the 90th anniversary of the formation of the CCP army and describes the Nanchang Uprising (also referred by the KMT as the Nanchang Insurrection) initiated by the KMT forces headed by Chiang Kai-shek on August 1, 1927. The main characters in the film include Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Zhu De, He Long, Ye Ting, Lin Biao, Ye Jianying and other renowned CCP military leaders. It seemed to embody the peak of the “Military Dream,” with Main Melody features seen clearly in its promotional song *We Want to be Strong Army Soldiers*, but on release it attracted immediate criticism from Ye Daying, a descendant of Ye Ting and the director of the 1995 Main Melody movie *Red Cherry*, who said, “Who are you humiliating when you ask a sissy hunky boy who can barely stand straight to perform as Ye Ting?”[60] Some journalists have even said that as Andrew Lau has the experiences of directing the *Young and Dangerous* series (1996-2000) and the *Infernal Affairs* series about corruption and criminals, audiences might assume that he has associated the CCP with gangsters in directing *The Founding of an Army*.[61]

In another instance, Alan Mak and Felix Chong, director and screenwriter of the *Infernal Affairs* series respectively, have been suspected of “telling the truth in a seemingly paradoxical way” when they directed the Main Melody movie *The Silent War*.[62] While seeming to lionize CCP comrades, there is a scene at the end of *The Silent War* capturing the moment when He Bing, performed by Tony Leung, in the role of He Bing, mourns for the revolutionary martyr Zhang Xuening and raises his hand in salute. Leung portrays him with a distressed face and eyes covered with black silk, seeming to imply that there is some reservation about the sincerity of his loyalty.





*Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*, a model play adapted from Qu Bo's famous novel *Tracks in the Snowy Forest*.



*The Taking of Tiger Mountain*, a 3D action thriller depicting the battle between a squad of the PLA and a bandit gang in north-east China during the Chinese Civil War.

*The Taking of Tiger Mountain* is an epic 3D action film adapted from the famous novel *Tracks in the Snowy Forest* by Qu Bo; the novel also forms the subject matter of a well-known “model play”[63] in China describing the battle between a squad of the PLA and a bandit gang in north-east China during the Chinese Civil War. The film’s title and characterization as a “red” movie resulted in bad press among Hong Kong audiences. Ostensibly a Main Melody film, some critics consider it to be in fact covertly oriented against Main Melody ideals in the way it turns the “three prominences (*san tuchu*)”[64] of model plays into “three non-prominences (*san bu tuchu*).” Thus one comment states:

“It is obvious that the intention of *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* is to narrate the emergence of the great villain Hawk (played by Hong Kong actor Tony Leung Ka-fai) in detail. On the other hand, the protagonist Yang Zirong (played by mainland Chinese actor Zhang Hanyu) who infiltrates the Tiger Mountain bandit group as a spy, not only lacks heroic qualities, but even scams the bandits in the village into a dog-eat-dog scenario, the very image of evil.”[65]

However, in another comment, according to Lei (2017):

“Tsui Hark has not only succeeded in turning *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* into a Hong Kong-style crime-thriller film and the PLA into a Hollywood-style 007, gaining it great popularity among young audiences on the mainland, but has also managed to utilize ‘red’ capital to keep Hong Kong films alive.”[66]

And in China *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* has received high acclaim, twice praised in the *People’s Daily* for being “high in quality” and for introducing “effective and innovative practices” in the making of Main Melody films.[67]

Funded by the same Bona Film Group as *The Taking of Tiger Mountain*, Ann Hui’s *Our Time Will Come* is a Main Melody film released on July 1, 2017 in commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the handover of Hong Kong. Although the story is set in Japanese-occupied Hong Kong and focuses on how the CCP guerrilla team known as “Dongjiang Column,” rescues a group of endangered intellectuals, the Main Melody characteristics of this film are obscure. In some aspects, the plot even reflects a perspective opposed to that of Main Melody films.

In the movie, Tony Leung Ka-fai plays the role of “Little” Ben, the sole surviving member of the Dongjiang Column, who tells his story from that historical period to several people in the film. Throughout the entire narration, there is no sense of drama, although features opposed to those of Main Melody movies are evident. For example, what stirs “Little” Ben to tears is not a yearning for the fulfilment of



*Our Time Will Come*, a commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the handover of Hong Kong, focuses on a CCP guerrilla team that rescues a group of endangered intellectuals in Japanese-occupied Hong Kong.



Hong Kong actress Deanie Ip playing the role of Mrs. Fong in *Our Time Will Come*.



political or patriotic interests, but rather a fond personal nostalgia for his teacher Fong Lan (played by Zhou Xun). Those who are sacrificed in the film are not well-known heroes, but people such as the mother of Fong Lan (aka Mrs. Fong, played by Deanie Ip), an illiterate woman who knows nothing about patriotism. Most ironic of all is that “Little” Ben, the sole surviving member of the Dongjiang Column, is not anyone with prominent status in the CCP, but a Hong Kong taxi driver who is merely struggling to earn a living. In a scene shot by the sea, Fong Lan says farewell to “Blackie” Lau (played by Taiwanese actor Eddie Peng), leader of the Hong Kong and Kowloon Battalion Team of the anti-Japanese guerrilla force, after which the camera pans from the dark seashore to today’s Hong Kong. What was once the sea has now changed into mulberry fields with numerous modern skyscrapers looming in the background, a thinly veiled message that, regardless of the period of Japanese colonial rule or 20 years passage of time since the handover of Hong Kong, there has been no change in the fate of Hong Kong people in their arduous striving for freedom. The English title of the film, *Our Time Will Come*, embodies a double meaning that is an apparent encouragement to those involved in their fight for this dream, not surprisingly leading many to ascribe to Ann Hui a “hidden agenda” in directing the movie, one that has even been interpreted as a “post-Umbrella Movement film”[68] by many critics.[69] Deanie Ip, a Hong Kong actress who won a number of local and international film awards for Best Actress for her role in *A Simple Life* (Ann Hui, 2011) as well as Best Supporting Actress at the Hong Kong Film Awards for her enactment of the role of Mrs. Fong in *Our Time Will Come*, was left out of promotional advertising in the mainland of *Our Time Will Come* due to her support of the Umbrella Movement and her public participation in the singing of the movement’s anthem *Raise the Umbrella*. The movie was furthermore disqualified from appearing as the opening film in the Shanghai International Film Festival due to her role in the movie.[70]

Hong Kong film critics have nevertheless generally viewed *Our Time Will Come* as a “failed” Main Melody film, given that Ann Hui excised nearly all “red” elements from the movie. The movie won five awards at the 37th Hong Kong Film Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Supporting Actress (Deanie Ip), Best Original Film Score (Hisaishi Joe), and Best Art Direction (Man Lim-chung and Billy Li). For a “Main Melody” film, such an achievement is rare in the context of Hong Kong.

As noted earlier, Peter Chan has been frequently lauded by the mainland media as the most successful Hong Kong filmmaker ever to have moved northward. His film *American Dreams in China*, introduced above, attained a record high of over 100 million RMB (US\$ 15.11 million) in box office in China within a mere three days after its release. As a Hong Kong film critic commented about this film, “This time, Peter Chan has been determined to serve the cause of the Main Melody movie.”[71] *American Dreams in China* not only promotes the “Entrepreneurship Dream,” it also conveys a sense of patriotic satisfaction in having conquered the United States. Such an approach undoubtedly fulfils the official goal of achieving “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” through realization of the “Chinese Dream.” Nonetheless, the film’s intriguing title *American Dreams in China* raises the question of a possible covert message from Chan. The three dream chasers in the movie who make a fortune starting up English-language-education institutions but who seem bent on pursuing the “American Dream” rather than a “Chinese Dream,” suggests that the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” is in actuality depends on the realization of an “American Dream.”

The latter part of the film is adapted from a legal dispute that actually took place in 2001 between New Oriental and the American Educational Testing Service (ETS). That year the ETS sent a public letter to U.S. universities questioning the reliability of GRE scores submitted by mainland exchange students. The letter implies that New Oriental had used past exam questions from the GRE without





Poster expressing the symbolic meaning of "umbrella" in *Our Time Will Come*.



The three dream chasers in *American Dreams in China* who make a fortune starting up English-language-education institutions but who seem bent on pursuing the "American Dream" rather than a "Chinese Dream," suggesting that the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" is in actuality a realization of the "American Dream."



Americans being criticized for treating Chinese unfairly in *American Dreams in China*, where Cheng Dongqing promotes the "logic" that respect can be bought with money.

authorization from the ETS. On February 23, 2001, ETS officially sued New Oriental through the First Intermediate People's Court in Beijing, resulting eventually in a verdict issued on September 27, 2003, convicting New Oriental for infringement of copyright and trademark and ordering it to pay over 10 million RMB (US\$ 1.51 million) in compensation. New Oriental subsequently appealed the judgment in the Beijing High Court, which on December 27, 2004, affirmed the lower court ruling but lowered the amount of compensation to 3.74 million RMB (US\$ 0.56 million).[72]

What is missing in the plot is any mention of the final resolution to the lawsuit whereby New Oriental was ordered to make compensation in the way described above. Instead, the film portrays a win-win situation, suggesting that the Americans are willing to reconcile and cooperate with New Oriental because they are convinced by Cheng Dongqing and his partners that, while admitting they had infringed on copyright law, their reasons for doing so were because of unfair treatment they had received at the hands of the Americans, in particular the unwillingness of the Americans to extend to them a level playing field in accordance with the American principle of equal opportunity under the law; this was the situation despite the great talent and industriousness of Cheng and his partners, as portrayed in a vivid demonstration in one of the central scenes in the film of his superb powers of memory. Highlighted in the film is the fervent desire of entrepreneurs like Cheng for respect from the Americans and a "Chinese logic" by which such respect can and ultimately will be earned by means of financial power. This logic is, of course, starkly different from the reality that New Oriental was ordered to pay compensation to the ETS. One critic's comment, "This time, Peter Chan has been determined to serve the cause of the Main Melody movie," may have perhaps missed Chan's intention to mock this "Chinese logic." Chan may have interpreted this attitude as, in fact, reflecting an inferiority complex among the Chinese, a negative feeling buried within the slogan "Rise of the Great Power." Such an attitude impels them to achieve through financial means what cannot be gained by means of talent alone, even if that requires resorting to means considered unethical in the West. The Chinese title of this film literally means "Chinese (business) partners (*Zhongguo hehuoren*)," and that idea may also reflect Chan's own identity as one who has worked in the mainland over many years and whose relation with China is no more than that of a business partner, based purely on financial interests.

In terms of commercial accomplishment, Dante Lam is another widely-known example of a Hong Kong filmmaker who has achieved success through producing Main Melody films. Both *Operation Mekong* and *Operation Red Sea* were military action films directed by Lam that gained great popularity in the mainland.

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The superhuman, even deified, portrayal of Chinese soldiers in *Operation Mekong* accords perfectly with the aims of China in fulfilling its "Military Dream."



*Operation Red Sea* became China's second highest-grossing movie ever.

The superhuman, even deified, portrayal of Chinese soldiers in these movies accords perfectly with the aims of China in fulfilling its "Military Dream." Critic Lu Yan-shan has commented that there are only a handful of Hong Kong filmmakers who have truly been brainwashed by the "party-state ideology," and Dante Lam is one of them.[73] Yet even *Operation Mekong* and *Operation Red Sea* adopt a Hollywood style to the greatest extent possible, every aspect of the film reflecting a commercial calculation based on "form" over "content." [74] The same can be said of *Wolf Warrior II*, the film directed by Wu Jing that became China's highest-grossing movie ever (followed in second place by *Operation Red Sea*). These three films, together with *Wolf Warrior* (Wu Jing, 2015), all place emphasis on imitating classic Hollywood movies, all aim to deify the PLA and Chinese military might, prominently exhibiting Main Melody characteristics.

## Amazing Grace: the deathknell of the Main Melody



Leng Feng about to be killed in *Wolf Warrior II*.



An African female hostage singing *Amazing*

In contrast to Dante Lam, Wu Jing, though having experience making action movies in Hong Kong, is a native Manchu who was born in Beijing. Whether affirmative or negative in their appraisal of his *Wolf Warrior II*, critics have tended to one-sidedly focus on the way it embodies the national consciousness of China "rising up." [75] In the process, however, the critics have missed the most crucial hint to understanding this movie's importance. Such a hint is embedded in a scene where one of the captured African female hostages, seeing that Leng Feng, played by Wu Jing, is about to be killed, bursts out singing the famous gospel song *Amazing Grace*. Written in 1773 by the English clergyman John Newton, it was inspired by the writer's experience of desperately asking for the mercy and salvation of God when a cargo ship he was on almost sank in a violent storm off the coast of Ireland during his early years when he was engaged in the black slave trade. The religious meaning of the song is very explicit, and it is diametrically opposed to the notion of "promoting socialist core values." It is certainly not in conformity with Marxist ideas on historical dialectical materialism, regarded by the CCP as a scientific worldview providing the only correct ideological and methodological foundation for undertaking sociopolitical revolution. Thus, on at least two occasions at international and domestic forums, so iconic a representative of the CCP as Zhou Enlai said, "We, the members of the CCP, are

Grace in *Wolf Warrior II*.



Leng Feng leading Chinese and African survivors with a five-star Red Flag in *Wolf Warrior II*.

atheists who believe in communism and no other religion.”[76] The attitude of hostility toward Christianity is evident in numerous reports in recent years of churches in the mainland being demolished and Christian activities being placed under increasing restrictions.[77]

In other words, in *Wolf Warrior II*, that is, *March of the Volunteers* and other “red” songs,[78] have been replaced by a hymn seeking help from God and embodying the “anti-Main Melody” idea that when faced with hard times, it is religious faith in Jesus Christ to which people can turn for salvation, not communist ideology. Interestingly, many mainland netizens have spoken of feeling deeply touched in seeing an African woman singing *Amazing Grace* in the film, some audiences shedding tears despite knowing nothing about the song.[79]

Along with exploiting the power inherent in *Amazing Grace*, this movie also recruited the talent of many Western artists who participated in the production of *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Joseph Eggleston, 2011), which became a big hit (84.7 million RMB, US\$ 12.8 million) when it was released in September 2011 in China. The actress chosen by Wu Jing, Celina Jade, to perform the role of the heroine in *Wolf Warrior II* was, furthermore, Chinese American. These aspects of the film suggest in no subtle way that the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” for Wu cannot be separated from the narrow ideas of defeating Western men and conquering Western women. Although the film violates the pronouncements of Xi Jinping in his 2014 Talk on Literature and Art, wherein he pointedly targets for criticism “considering the West as nobility,” “considering the West as beauty,” “following Western values obediently,” and “blindly imitating [the West] with ludicrous effect,”[80] it is the great irony of contemporary Chinese cinema that *Wolf Warrior II* has been praised as “one of the most successful Main Melody movies [ever]”[81] by the Chinese official media *Liberation Daily* and even selected by China to compete for Best Foreign Language Film at the 90th Academy Awards (where it failed to be nominated in the first stage of competition).



Poster of *The Great Wall* exhibiting close affinities with *Godzilla*, a 1998 Hollywood adaptation of the classic Japanese monster movie.

Appearing very closely in time to *Wolf Warrior II*, though much less successful in box office (grossing US\$ 334 million worldwide as against a production budget of US\$ 150 million),[82] *The Great Wall* (Zhang Yimou, 2016) is another movie that some have considered emblematic of the Main Melody genre.[83] The film does appear to present a strong China in military terms, and the plot does have westerners coming to China to steal the secret of gunpowder, a symbol of China’s technological strength and an apparent rebuttal of the criticism directed against China in recent times for its attempts to steal Western technology. Closer analysis reveals, however, that this view is not tenable. The film is, in the first place, one produced using U.S. capital, and the plot portraying a white man, the erstwhile thief of the gunpowder technology, has him be ultimately the saviour of China in the way he subdues the intruding monster. The storyline, then, is hardly one consistent with the Main Melody objective of promoting “party-state ideology.”[84] In fact, the script is somewhat more complex, as what saves China in the movie is not the white westerner acting alone, but rather the “trust” (*xinren* in Chinese) achieved between him and the Chinese. The monster appearing in the film (*Taotie*, one of the four evil creatures of ancient Chinese mythology), is green in color and emerges at intervals of 60 years to threaten the unity and stability of China. In that way it quite arguably represents Taiwan, with the threat it posed to China 60 years earlier under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek, and again in contemporary times under the leadership of the DPP (member of the so-called pan-Green coalition), a feature which may seem consistent with the Main Melody focus point of disparaging enemies of the CCP. This is difficult to reconcile, however, with the portrayal of a westerner, played by Matt Damon, clearly identifiable as an American, in the role of defender of China, given the United States’ role as the strongest supporter of Taiwan in the real world today. [85] The temporal setting of the plot, moreover, is during the Sung dynasty, one of the militarily weakest of China’s major historical dynasties, with the emperor and his court portrayed in the film as incapable and ineffective; this could hardly





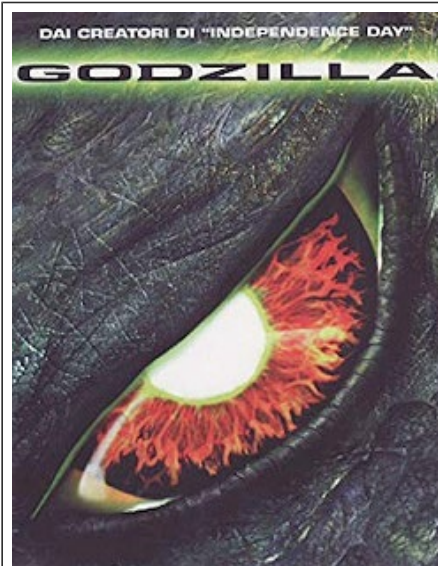
Poster of *The Great Wall* with a close up of the eye of the monster "Taotieh."



Poster of *The Great Wall* showing the paw of the monster "Taotieh."



Poster of *Godzilla*.



Poster of *Godzilla* with a close up of the eye of Godzilla.



Poster of *Godzilla* showing the paw of Godzilla.

## Conclusion

Coupled with the rise of China in the 21st century has been the rise of the






*My War*, a film adaptation of Ba Jin's novel *Reunion*, was originally poised to achieve enormous commercial success until a boycott was initiated by netizens.

Internet. Never before has a regime or period been subject to surveillance on a scale like that which has occurred with the advent of “netizens.” It is a fact that netizens have emerged as a major force exerting pressures on the governance of a country like China.[86] Despite attempts by the government to control the Internet by blocking or intercepting access to what it considers inappropriate content, it is unable to fully prevent netizens from unblocking filtered websites and expressing their feelings and opinions on Internet platforms. In a similar way, netizen power also holds great sway over the success or failure of films.

For example, *My War*, a 2016 Main Melody movie adaptation of Ba Jin’s novel *Reunion*, was originally poised to achieve enormous commercial success. Produced by CFGC, incorporating 3D effects, featuring the topic of war, released during the Mid-Autumn Festival holiday period, directed by a Hong Kong director (Oxide Pang), with a script written by Liu Heng, and starring Liu Ye, every indicator predicated success for the film, until a boycott was initiated by netizens because of their discontent with a promotional video for the movie in which a Korean female tour guide is treated by some Chinese veterans “inhumanly.”[87] The resulting poor box office gross covered less than a quarter of the production costs of the film. Contemporaneous with this, *The Hundred Regiments Offensive* (Ning Haiqiang and Zhang Yuzhong, 2015) was released in commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the Anti-Japanese War. Though its promoters boasted box office revenues of over 100 million RMB (US\$ 15.11 million) within two days of its release, its success was suspected by netizens of being something faked. Official efforts to urge people to watch the film were an attempt to counteract prevailing attitudes among netizens:

“Main Melody films have no market power at all because the younger



*The Hundred Regiments Offensive*, a commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the Anti-Japanese War.

generations, which dominate viewership ratings, have no interest in such Main Melody movies. Moreover, they generally have a vigilant and resistant attitude toward films that promote collectivism. The ones that perform better in the market are Hollywood films that embody individualism and humanity. The market and box office revenues claimed for Main Melody movies, are, on the contrary, a sheer fabrication.”[88]

And film producers have a harder time escaping such “surveillance” by netizens than do government officials. To reiterate Han Sanping’s comment above,

“It is not difficult to make a film that political leaders are satisfied with; however, to make audiences feel satisfied, it is the making of an ‘enjoyable’ film that we will take as our understood goal.”[89]

In order to strictly follow this logic and impress audiences, motivating them to pay willingly for movie tickets, the best approach for Main Melody films is in fact to “downplay” their Main Melody characteristics. Given current market conditions, mainland filmmakers, whether representing national or private enterprises, have no choice but to rely on the experience and skills of Hong Kong directors. Even Main Melody films that have garnered high acclaim in the mainland, such as *American Dreams in China* and *The Taking of Tiger Mountain*, typically contain a few “hidden messages.”

In conclusion, Main Melody movies as traditionally understood have in recent years been charting a path to extinction due to the high degree of commercialization demanded of movies in the 21st century. Promotion of the “party-state ideology” no longer ranks as their highest mission. In the era of Xi Jinping, Main Melody films placed emphasis on the notion of “Rich Nation, Strong Army,” which inevitably meant that they had to forgo any historical perspective casting China as a “victim of imperialism,” a perspective prominently upheld during the regime of Jiang Zemin. On the contrary, Main Melody movies have had to follow the pattern of *Wolf Warrior II*, putting effort into deifying the Chinese economy and military and gaining international attention. Such consciousness of China as a “strong nation” has unavoidably intensified conflicts between China and Hong Kong as well as China and Taiwan, resulting in the failure of Main Melody movies to achieve the “united front” that figured so prominently among its priorities early in the new century. Main Melody movies have to the contrary even become the target of laughter and disdain by audiences in Hong Kong and Taiwan. *Cairo Declaration* and *The Hundred Regiments Offensive* were released in one Hong Kong theater only (Amoy Theater in Kowloon Bay, which is now closed); *Wolf Warrior II* in Hong Kong received a meagre 5 million HKD (US\$ 0.63 million) in box office revenue, a survey of Hong Kong youth revealing that they have “no interest in such a national film filled with patriotic sentiment.”[90] Most Main Melody movies are not even released in Taiwan, supposedly because of the quota system imposed by Taiwan on mainland movies (10 films per year), but in fact more likely due to differing political stances and the anticipation of a likely negative reception in the Taiwanese market. A rare exception of a Main Melody movie released in Taiwan was *The Message*, which received a highly positive reception there.[91] This can be attributed to the relatively friendly relations that prevailed between the CCP and the KMT, the ruling party in Taiwan, in 2009 and the effort of Chen Kuo-fu to erase as completely as possible any Main Melody emphases from the film.

Moreover, the strategy adopted by some Hong Kong filmmakers of producing movies covertly opposed to Main Melody ideals and using “red” capital to tell the “truth” in a paradoxical way has proved increasingly difficult because of tighter and more conservative policy restrictions implemented following the 2014 Umbrella Movement and the speech on Literature and Art by Xi Jinping in the same year. After having devoted himself to the commercialization of Main Melody movies, Han Sanping announced his retirement as Chairman of the CFGC and China Film Co., Ltd in 2014, representing a major shift in the Chinese film industry on a scale similar to that of Chen Kuo-fu leaving Huayi Brothers in 2013. Reorganizations such as these that have taken place in personnel structures in the movie business bespeak how effective and influential the speech by Xi has been. The effects are not likely to be limited to Main Melody movies, but, as noted by Hong Kong director Johnnie To, commercial films with political implications—such as *Drug War*, a 2013 China-Hong Kong action thriller portraying insoluble social and political incompatibilities between mainland China and Hong Kong—are also likely to be impacted and less likely to appear henceforth on the silver screen in the mainland.[92] □

In order to meet the standards of netizens and audiences, Main Melody movies will inevitably have to become more commercialized, unavoidably leading to a situation where a greater variety of forms of entertainment will need to be adopted to counteract increasingly severe political uncertainties. However, when literature and art in China are confronted by criticism from the top leader that they are being led by the nose by current market interests, there is no doubt that they will continue to seek umbrage by using the Main Melody label, even though it has lost its original content and continues to exist in name only. Filmmakers need to do so in order to survive in the seesaw battle between “political correctness” and “market reality.”

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### Notes

1. Also referred to as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), founded in 1921, party of the People's Republic of China (PRC) since 1949. [[return to page 1](#)]

2. Deng said of Hu that he “monitors party discipline impartially and incorruptibly, but simply does not understand the dangers of liberalization.” See Wei, 2013.

3. Yu, 2013, pp. 166-167.

4. This ideology is a doctrine that holds that the Party, i.e., the CCP, has supreme control over all aspects of the governance and politics of the state, i.e., China, holding sway even over Marxism, socialism, democratic principles, or any individual autocrat, and that absolute loyalty to the Party is accordingly expected of all citizens. See Xia.

5. Tian and Liu, 2014, pp. 4-5.

6. Huang, 2015, p. 130.

7. Lian, 2015, p. 105.

8. “Genre” here should be understood as an ideological category of film promoting a particular political perspective, rather than traditionally understood genre of film such as action film, comedy, etc.

9. Chang, 2010; Elena, 2013; Shen Y., 2010; and Wang, 2011.

10. Davis, 2010, p. 121.

11. Davis, 2014; and Yu, 2013.

12. Li, 2017.

13. Chan, 2017.

14. Ewalt, 2018.

15. The full text of the speech was released one year later on October 15, 2015 and is approximately 14,000 Chinese words in length. See Jiang and Qin, 2015.

16. Although Xi does not single out specific films for criticism, in the same speech

he characterizes recent literature and art in China as being overly obsessed with a market-oriented philosophy, quantity rather than quality, imitation, sex and wealth, and a blind following of the West.

17. Zhang, 2014.

18. This film passed the script screening process in July 1988 and started shooting in November of the same year. The week before its completion the world was shocked by the Tiananmen Incident. As a result, Jiang Zemin, General Secretary of the CPC at the time, suggested that certain words in the film be deleted, such as the words “democracy” and “supervise the government” spoken by Mao Zedong in a scene depicting a conversation between him and his son, Anying, at Yinian Hall in Zhongnanhai. These words were replaced by a sentence ripe with interpretive potential: “What is uppermost in the mind of a great leader as victory comes within sight is that while accomplishing the great task [of gaining victory] is difficult, what is even more difficult is the task of maintaining what is gained [in the victory].” See Anonymous, 2016.

19. Main Melody movies that embody the spirit of revolution and the hardships encountered in founding the CCP or the PRC are also called *xianli pian* (commemorative film). The release dates of *xianli pian* are closely linked with the commemoration of a certain political event. See Chang, 2010, p. 14.

20. In 1966, during the Cultural Revolution, Tian Han was condemned as a “counter-revolutionary” and the singing of *March of the Volunteers* was forbidden. Instead, the masses would sing songs that glorified Mao Zedong, such as *The East Is Red* and *Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman*. In 1979, Tian was posthumously restored to grace by the Chinese authorities, and *March of the Volunteers* was ultimately reinstated as the national anthem of the PRC in 1982.

21. The Kuomintang was the ruling party in mainland China until 1949 when it was forced to retreat to Taiwan following defeat by the CCP in the Chinese Civil War.

22. After China’s admission to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, the number of imported films allowed was increased to 20 per year. See Su, 2010, p. 39. Subsequently, as publicly announced in the 2012 Joint Statement Regarding U.S.-China Agreement on Film-Related Issues, the number of imported Hollywood movies, mostly those incorporating IMAX or 3D effects, was increased to 34 films per year, in addition to 30 to 40 other films imported annually from outside China, mainly from Europe and Japan. See Smith and Davis, 2012.

23. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 1995.

24. Takamine, 2006, p. 123.

25. Even after the Tiananmen Incident Japan was the first country to lift international sanctions against China and announced the restoration of economic assistance to China in July 1990. In August 1991, former Japanese Prime Minister Kaifu Toshiki visited China, becoming the first world leader from a developed country to visit China since the Tiananmen Incident.

26. He, 2013.

27. The relationship between the Chinese film industry and Hollywood movies can be seen from different perspectives, including the economic dependency of China on the U.S. during the economic opening, the rivalry between the two countries driven by the threat of competition from foreign films and the cooperation for achieving commercial success. See Davis, 2010 and 2014; Rosen, 2002; Su, 2010; Wan and Richard, 2002; and Xiao, 2001.

28. Huang, 2015; Tian and Liu, 2014.

29. The male and female protagonists in this film—Paul Kersey, who played the American injured pilot and Ning Jing, who played the female fighter from the Eighth Route Army—were married after the filming. They were divorced in 2011 citing cultural differences.

30. An earlier film that achieved enormous artistic and commercial success and brought together talent from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan and that may be seen as a forerunner of this kind of film is *Farewell My Concubine* (Chen Kaige, 1993).

31. Famous as one of the “Fifth Generation” filmmakers (generally referring to members of the 1982 graduating class of the Beijing Film Academy in 1982, the year of its reopening following the end of the Cultural Revolution), Zhang Yimou debuted as a director in *Red Sorghum* (1987), a film based on the novel *Red Sorghum Clan* by Nobel Laureate Mo Yan that went on to win the Golden Bear Award at the 1988 Berlin International Film Festival. Subsequent works of his such as *Ju Dou* (1990), *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992), *To Live* (1994), *Not One Less* (1999), and *The Road Home* (1999) also gained him considerable international acclaim. Like most of his counterparts in the “Fifth Generation,” one of Zhang’s early recurrent themes is the resilience of Chinese people in the face of political chaos and poverty, while his films are also well-known for their rich use of colors and ceremonies that are replete with “oriental” touches. Gao (2009) believes that some in the “Fifth Generation,” including Zhang, began to devote themselves to commercial production as early as from the late 1980s when China was in the midst of its market reforms. Hao Jian, professor at the Beijing Film Academy, furthermore argues, Zhang entered a “politically-correct” phase around the period when Jiang Zemin became the top leader in China after the death of Deng Xiaoping in February 1997 (see Anonymous, 2010); although Karima Fumitoshi, former professor at the University of Tokyo, believes that Zhang’s earlier film *The Story of Qiu Ju* is also an example of a politically-correct work promoting the virtues of the law system in China. Nevertheless Zhang’s involvement in Main Melody production is apparent from his directing of *Hero*, a martial arts fantasy film based on the story of an assassination attempt by Jing Ke on the King of Qin (later to become Qin Shi Huang, the First Emperor of China) in 227 BC. In the movie, however, Zhang rewrites history, portraying Qin as escaping assassination because he desires a unified and peaceful *Tianxia* (literally “under heaven,” an ancient Chinese cultural concept associated with political sovereignty), and the assassins all become convinced that Qin is the only individual capable of achieving that vision. *Hero* became the first Chinese-language movie to place No. 1 at the American box office. Zhang was also director of the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games.



Contemporaries of his such as Chen Kaige, Huang Jianxin, and Hu Mei have been dedicated to Main Melody filmmaking since the turn of the millennium, works by them in this genre include Chen's *The Promise* (2005) and *Sacrifice* (2010); Huang's *The Founding of a Republic* (2009) and *The Founding of a Party* (2011); and Hu's *Confucius* (2010).

32. CFGC, a giant government-owned enterprise, founded in 1992 and widely recognized as the most productive and influential film company in China, consists of eight production units whose works are largely Main Melody movies. It is also one of a limited number of government-authorized film importers in China (another one being Huaxia Film Distribution Company).

33. Han and Huang, 2010, p. 6.

34. Ibid., p. 5.

35. Chang, 2010; Elena, 2013; Qiu, 2013; Shen Y., 2010; and Wang, 2011.

36. Lee, 2015.

37. John Woo's two-part epic war film *Red Cliff* (2008-09), Johnnie To's action thriller *Drug war* (2013) and musical comedy *Office* (2015), Stephen Chow's comic science fiction *CJ7* (2008), fantasy costume comedy *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons* (2013), and fantasy romantic comedy *The Mermaid* (2016), are all blockbusters made with mainland Chinese capital. *Drug war* set a new box office record in the category of criminal film in mainland China, while *Office* took in 43 million RMB in box office within five days of its release. *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons* broke the global box office in the category of Chinese film, and *The Mermaid* became the first film in Chinese history to gross more than 3 billion RMB.

38. Chen, Gao, Zheng, Hu and Zhang, 2009, p. 35.

39. Some have argued (e.g. Zhang 2017 and Liao 2018), that commercialized Main Melody movies have had success in exerting "soft power," in the same way that Hollywood has had success in promoting American cultural values to the world through its "soft power." See Zhang, 2017 and Liao, 2018. But I contend that Main Melody movies are in one critical respect quite different from Hollywood films: they are designed to promote hard-line political dogma not Chinese cultural values. This point of view is similar to that expressed by Voci and Hui (2018), who suggest that soft power in the Chinese context is inextricably linked to centralized policies, given the authoritarian nature of the Chinese state (p. 4). Furthermore, as I argue later in the paper, the examples of "Main Melody" films that might be cited as successful in exerting "soft power" in this way turn out upon analysis to in fact be promoting ideology quite different from the "party-state ideology" that Main Melody films were initially envisioned as promoting. Films that are genuinely Main Melody in character are the ones that have not gained success either commercially or in effectively exerting "soft power" on their target audience in the 21st century since the advent of the Internet.

40. Widely known as the "first privately held film company in China" and founded by Wang Zhongjun and his brother Zhonglei in 1994, Huayi Brothers began their

business in the film industry by investing in Jiang Wen's movies and Feng Xiaogang's Chinese New Year films. In 2009, Huayi Brothers were offered a loan of 120 million RMB by the state-owned Industrial and Commercial Bank of China Ltd (ICBC) for producing *The Message* (Chen Kuo-fu and Gao Qunshu, 2009), *Tracing Shadow* (Francis Ng and Marco Mak, 2009), *Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame* (Tsui Hark, 2010) and *Aftershock* (Feng Xiaogan, 2010), two of which (*The Message* and *Aftershock*) are classified as Main Melody movies. [[return to page 2](#)]

41. Anonymous, 2014.

42. Wang, 2009.

43. Chen, 2009.

44. On August 28, 1945, Chiang and Mao held a historic meeting in Chongqing, leaving the one and only photograph of the two.

45. Shen S., 2010, p. 112.

46. This was later targeted for sarcasm by Han Han, a popular mainland writer, in his remark: "Given that so many people have left [the Republic], it follows that there are many great projects yet to be accomplished [that date back to] the founding of the Republic; if that were not so, it would mean that many foreigners of Chinese origin have come back to participate in the production of this film or to play the role of villains in the historical period portrayed." He implies that if the Republic is indeed the success it is claimed to be, there would be no citizens in the Republic who could effectively play the negative role of villains, thus requiring reliance on foreigners. See Han, 2009.

47. For example, in a speech commemorating the fifth anniversary of the return of Macau to China in 2004, Hu Jintao declared that "In particular, we need to have a sense of being prepared for danger in times of peace, an innovative idea that keeps pace with the times and with a spirit of overcoming arduous difficulties as we initiate new undertakings." See Anonymous, 2004. This sense of crisis was also touched on in another speech Hu delivered in the same year at the Fourth Plenary Meeting of the CCP Central Committee, where he said, "The enemy's media in foreign countries sometimes launch malicious attacks on our country's leaders and political system. Our local media, on the other hand, promote the western bourgeoisie in regard to parliamentary democracy, human rights and freedom of the press, spreading the idea of bourgeois liberalization in the name of political and structural reform. They negate the Four Cardinal Principles [introduced by Deng Xiaoping, namely (1) upholding the socialist path; (2) upholding the people's democratic dictatorship; (3) upholding the leadership of the CPC; and (4) upholding Mao's Thought and Marxism-Leninism] and negate the state and the political regime. In dealing with these mistakes, we must not be soft-hearted. We should reinforce censorship of the press and never provide channels for any incorrect ideology." See Jiang, 2004. Some critics view the speeches of Hu as having greatly strengthened the influence of Main Melody movies under his presidency. See Anonymous, 2010.

48. The Sunflower Student Movement, also known as the "March 18 Student

Movement” or the “Occupy Taiwan Legislature Movement,” was a protest driven by a coalition of students and civic groups that occurred during the period between March 18 and April 10, 2014 in the Legislative Yuan. The main demand of the protesters was cancelation of the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA), signed by the Straits Exchange Foundation and the Association for Relations across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS) during the ninth round of cross-strait talks in Shanghai on June 21, 2013. Upon release of the list of sectors subject to the treaty, there was widespread concern that signing the treaty would result in Taiwan becoming economically and politically more subordinate to the control of China. The Taiwanese people had also become discontent with the policy of the KMT, seen as consistently leaning toward Beijing, suspecting the KMT of implementing a third stage of cooperation with the CCP. These suspicions eventually led to the “Controversy over checking procedures in the CSSTA” and other incidents such as the Sunflower Student Movement. In 2016, following a ruling by the DPP, the CSSTA was immediately suspended.

49. When Shu Qi, a Taiwanese actress who had become a top star in China in 2008 with release of the blockbuster film *If You Are the One*, attended the Cannes Film Festival for the film *The Assassin* (Hou Hsiao-hsien, 2015), organizers of the Festival presented her as “Chinese” in nationality. Shu allegedly requested the organizers to change this to “Taiwanese” and initially introduced herself to the foreign media as “I am from Taiwan.” Chinese Internet users irritated by this subsequently unleashed thousands of personal attacks and threats against her on social media.

50. Chou Tzu-yu is a Taiwanese singer based in South Korea and a member of the K-pop girl group TWICE. In 2015, she was shown holding the flag of the Republic of China in a South Korean variety show, subjecting her to accusations of being a “Taiwanese independence activist” by the Taiwanese-born, China-based singer Huang An. Huang’s comment on his Sina Weibo site gave rise to a major controversy in China, provoking strong antagonism toward Chou from Chinese netizens. As a result, her commercial endorsement by the Chinese communications company Huawei was revoked, and activities of TWICE in China were suspended or canceled. In the wake of strong criticism of Chou’s agent JYP Entertainment from Chinese netizens, JYP Entertainment released on January 15, 2016, a video of Chou reading a statement of apology in which she affirms her identity as a Chinese.

51. Anonymous, 2015.

52. Scholars have called the accelerated restructuring of the Hong Kong film industry made possible by the CEPA privileges since 2003 as a “mainlandization” process of Hong Kong cinema. See Szeto and Chen, 2011. For a detailed treatment of China-Hong Kong co-production films (*Zhonggang hepai pian*) between 2003 and 2013, see Yau, 2015.

53. Regarding how the Japanese designed and put the “Greater East Asian films” into practice, see Yau, 2010.

54. Some scholars classify Main Melody movies featuring the “Chinese Dream” into four categories, viz. the dream of “Science and Technology” (illustrated by *Oriental Chinese Dream*, directed by Yang Zhen in 2013), the dream of “Military”



(illustrated by *Target Locked*, directed by Ning Haiqiang in 2013), the dream of “Wealth” (illustrated by *The Traces of Zu*, directed by Lu Jian in 2014), and the dream of “Entrepreneurship.” Among these four, *American Dreams in China* represents the dream of “Entrepreneurship,” portraying the ideal of “integrating the interests of individual, country and nation,” conveyed in Xi’s 2012 speech on the “Chinese Dream.” See Li, 2016. In such a political context, the release of *American Dreams in China* two months after the Xi regime came to power can hardly be seen as a coincidence.

55. BRI is a Chinese strategic plan first announced by Xi Jinping in Kazakhstan in 2013 that aims to boost economic connectivity between China and various regions of Europe, Asia and Africa.

56. Starting from March 4, 2005, anti-Japanese demonstrations took place in more than 60 cities in China, triggered by the controversy surrounding the Fusosha history textbook, Japan’s quest for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and the disputes over the Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands and oil and gas fields in the East China Sea (Donghai). In response to this anti-Japanese trend, Gao Qunshu directed *The Tokyo Trial* portraying the experience of Mei Ju-ao, one of the judges in the Tokyo Trials between 1946 and 1948. Following the visit to Yasukuni Shrine on August 15, 2006, by Koizumi Junichiro, former Japanese prime minister, 12-hour marathon screenings of this film were held at 13 theaters in Shanghai, promoted as a “must-watch film for every Chinese.” The film was released nationwide on September 1st in the same year. [[return to page 3](#)]

57. Chen, Gao, Zheng, Hu and Zhang, 2009, p. 35.

58. Businessman Yu Dong was authorized in 1992 to establish the Beijing Cultural Exchange Co., Ltd, specializing in film distribution. Subsequently, his company was restructured into the Bona Film Group (BFG), mainly sponsoring China-Hong Kong co-productions and Main Melody films made by Hong Kong directors. In 2003, BFG merged with the national enterprise Poly Group and formed Poly-Bona Film Distribution Co., Ltd. Poly-Bona was granted a loan of 55 million RMB by ICBC for the production and distribution of three China-Hong Kong co-productions, namely *Overheard*, *Bodyguards and Assassins*, and *Little Big Soldier* (Ding Sheng, 2010). Among these three, *Bodyguards and Assassins* is considered to be a Main Melody film. In 2008, together with Hong Kong Emperor Motion Pictures and actor Jackie Chan, BFG founded Bona Yinglong Talent Management Co., Ltd, joined by top stars such as mainland Chinese actress Fan Bingbing. In 2010, BFG became the first Chinese entertainment company to succeed in being listed on the U.S. stock exchange.

59. Choi, 2017. Andrew Lau was subsequently given approval to direct *When Robbers Meet the Monster* (aka *Kung Fu Monster*), which was released as a martial arts fantasy film in December 2018.

60. Ye, 2017.

61. Anonymous, Aboluowang, 2017.

62. Choi, 2017.

63. Planned and engineered during the Cultural Revolution by Jiang Qing, wife of Mao Zedong, “model play” (*yangban xi*) is a term originating in an article entitled “Excellent Models for Revolutionary Art” that appeared in the *People’s Daily* on May 31, 1967. The celebrated eight model plays produced during the first three years of the Cultural Revolution include *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* (Peking opera), *The Legend of the Red Lantern* (Peking opera), *Shajiabang* (Peking opera), *Raid on the White Tiger Regiment* (Peking opera), *On the Docks* (Peking opera), *The White-Haired Girl* (ballet), *Red Detachment of Women* (ballet), and *Shajiabang* (symphony). Model plays are subject to requirements on shooting technique that cannot be violated, such as the use of the camera to create a clear distinction between friend and foe. Foes are usually pictured as far away, evil, small in size, and viewed from a higher position; while friends are pictured as close, righteous, large in size, and viewed from a lower position.

64. The “three prominences” refers to the literary expression proposed by Jiang Qing and other CCP members during the Cultural Revolution. When depicting proletarian heroes, one must (1) highlight the characters with positive traits among all characters; (2) among characters portrayed positively, highlight heroic characters; and (3) among heroic characters, highlight the main heroic characters. The techniques of highlighting characters include placing protagonists in the center of the stage or the screen, and project a spotlight on him or her. On the contrary, antagonists have to be put in the corner, highlighted by bottom light or backlight.

65. Hung, 2016.

66. Lei, 2017.

67. Mu and Chen, 2016.

68. So-called “post-Umbrella Movement films” are movies that explicitly mention or implicitly refer to the “Umbrella Movement” and Hong Kong movies produced subsequent to that, examples including *Ten Years* (Jevons Au, Wong Fei-pang, Ng Ka-leung, Chow Kwun-Wai and Kwok Zune, 2015), *The Mobfathers* (Herman Yau, 2016) and *Trivisa* (Jevons Au, Vicky Wong and Frank Hui, 2016). The Umbrella Movement was a series of protests that occurred in Hong Kong from September 26 to December 15, 2014, in pursuit of genuine universal suffrage. Protesters spontaneously occupied major public areas and thoroughfares including Admiralty, Tamar, Central, Wan Chai, Causeway Bay, Mong Kok, and Tsim Sha Tsui. They demanded retraction of the decision of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress (NPCSC) regarding the 2016 Legislative Council Election and 2017 Chief Executive Election through sit-ins and protest marches. The protesters also advocated a civil nomination process for the election of the chief executive and the abolition of functional constituencies in the Legislative Council of Hong Kong. Yellow umbrellas became a symbol of the movement, originating from the way front-line protesters protected themselves from pepper spraying from the police by using umbrellas, resulting in references to the movement by the media as the “Umbrella Movement” or the “Umbrella Revolution.”

69. Choi, 2017.

70. Choi, 2017 and Ryan, 2017.
71. Kar, 2013.
72. Anonymous, 2005.
73. Choi, 2017.
74. Shek, 2018.
75. Liu and Rofel, 2018.
76. Feng, 2006.
77. Goldman, 2018.
78. “Red” songs generally refer to the political songs glorying the CCP in mainland China. Well-known examples include *The East is Red; Without the Communist Party, There Would Be No New China*; and *The March of the Chinese PLA*.
79. Anonymous, Shangc, 2017.
80. Jiang and Qin, 2015.
81. Anonymous, KKnews, 2017.
82. D’Alessandro, 2017.
83. Lan, 2017.
84. Constance Wu, an American Taiwanese actress who plays the female lead Rachel Chu in the blockbuster film *Crazy Rich Asians* (Jon M. Chu, 2018), openly criticized *The Great Wall* saying “We have to stop perpetuating the racist myth that [only a] white man can save the world.” See Jung, 2016. Zhang Yimou’s earlier work *The Flowers of War* also follows the pattern of an American hero, played in the film by Christian Bale, turning himself from a selfish, dishonest mortician into a righteous priest who saves virginal Chinese schoolgirls from the Japanese devils during the Nanjing Massacre.
85. Chung, 2018.
86. According to the Chinese government, 802 million people, about 57.7% of people in China, are now actively using the Internet. See McCarthy, 2018.
87. In the promotional video, a group of old soldiers from the Chinese People’s Volunteer Army who had participated in the Korean War tell a South Korean female tour guide that they had been in Seoul 60 years ago, which at the time was known as Hanseong. They needed no passport; only a red flag was enough to get in. Netizens have taken offense at the opinions of these veterans as being “anti-human,” suggesting that if old Japanese soldiers were to go to Nanking and do the same thing, they would be severely condemned. This video has since been blocked.
88. Lee, 2015.



89. Han and Huang, 2010.

90. Li, 2017.

91. The mainland Chinese actresses Li Bingbing and Zhou Xun, who performed in *The Message*, were nominated simultaneously for Best Actress Award at the 46th Golden Horse Awards in Taiwan. The Award eventually went to Li. This film was also nominated for Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Visual Effects, Best Art Direction, and Best Makeup and Costume Design. The Taiwanese actor Su You-peng appearing in this film won Best Supporting Actor Award at the 30th Hundred Flowers Awards held in China. See Anonymous, 2009.

92. Choi, 2017.

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Images from *Ermo*:



Ermo, the title character, enjoys the pleasure of capitalist consumption.



Ermo is determined to possess the 29" TV.



Ermo's pursuit leads to emotional and physical exhaustion.

Images from *The Wedding Banquet*:

## Man on the thin line: Chinese cinema and capitalism's second coming

review by [Li Zeng](#)

*Economy, Emotion, and Ethics in Chinese Cinema: Globalization on Speed* by David Leiwei Li (Routledge, 2016). 248 pp., \$51.95 paper.

In a short span of three decades, China has experienced capitalist transformation at an unprecedented speed and scale, compared to its emergence over three centuries in the West. This hyper-compressed development has tremendously, and ruthlessly, changed individual subjectivity, social relations, and the emotional economy in China and the Sinophone world. Largely drawing on Marxist theory and the philosophy of neoliberal capitalism, *Economy, Emotion, and Ethics in Chinese Cinema* probes into films produced in the People's Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan, and Hong Kong, to reveal the remaking of Chinese-ness and the Chinese subject under the influence of rapid capitalist implementation and its dehumanizing impact. In the book's Introduction, David Leiwei Li explains that he uses Chinese cinema as "semantic shorthand for 'Chinese-language cinema,' downplaying geopolitical divisions while heightening a shared Sinophonic-phenotypical visual identity." (6)

Li also aims as a central goal to imagine possibilities of cultural resistance to what he calls "Capitalism's Second Coming." Li identifies "Capitalism's First Coming" in China as a result of China's defeat in the Opium Wars (1840-42), and the Second Coming as launched in the Deng Xiaoping era (1976-89) after an intermission of "Mao's nationalist independence... ending decisively the era of Capitalism's First Coming." (3) Li applies "Capitalism's Second Coming" to China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong without differentiating their geopolitical and historical specificities. Overall, Li undertakes in the book a

"symptomatic interpretation of Chinese cinema's mediation and contestation of a neobourgeois reality, rationality, and affectivity." (10)

*Economy, Emotion, and Ethics in Chinese Cinema* does not offer a conventional or focused cinema studies approach, for film is not the end, but rather the means, of Li's project. Li deploys film as a medium through which the reader can better understand the "unfathomable macroscopic forces" of global capitalist transformation, and the "always abstract theories of a global imaginary." (10) Although Li analyzes a selection of Chinese films primarily to illustrate how global capitalism works and impacts social subjects, his dense discussion of cultural and political theories and the consequences of neoliberalism do reveal philosophical depth in the cinematic texts. The framing invites the reader to understand the work as a dialogue between the film medium and social and political theories about capitalist modernity.

The book consists of three sections, each focusing on a particular thematic concern that those specific title terms suggest. Part I studies the construction of



The son is caught in between being filial to his parents and being true to his gay relationship in *Wedding Banquet*.



The reconciliation between the father and the son, between heterosexuality and homosexuality.



The parents' departure at the end of *Wedding Banquet*.

Images from *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman*:



The daughters feel pressured to maintain the family in the old ways valued by their widowed

the liberal and neoliberal Chinese subject through examination of Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* (1987) and Zhou Xiaowen's *Ermo* (1994) in Chapter 1 and Zhang Yuan's documentary *Crazy English* (1999) in Chapter 2. Li views *Red Sorghum* as an allegory of "primitive accumulation." The character whom the film's narrator calls Grandpa, in his claim of Grandma and the sequential possession of the winery, represents for Li the new spirit of capitalism, for Grandpa embodies the convergence of the individual pursuit of happiness and the lust for material gain. The title character in *Ermo*, a film which follows a peasant woman's quest for the largest television set in her county, manifests in Li's interpretation the transformation from an agrarian socialist subject to a "self-possessive individual." While Li posits that *Red Sorghum* and *Ermo* reflect the transformation of the Chinese peasant subject, he argues that *Crazy English* documents the emergence of the neoliberal Chinese urban subject. Zhang Yuan's documentary follows Li Yang, a young entrepreneur who has made his "Crazy English" language-learning program a multimillion-dollar brand name. Li maintains that Li Yang's success serves as an allegory for the personal and psychological actualization of neoliberalism "with Chinese characteristics."

The most thought-provoking section in Part I is Li's case study of *Ermo*, which interweaves dense theoretical and philosophical discussions into detailed textual analysis. Departing from Macpherson's concept of "the possessive individual," Li sheds lights on how possessive individualism infuses the character Ermo with agency and self-assertion and gives her the power to resist patriarchal domination (represented by her husband) and to pursue her desire. While finding that the film affirms the new neoliberal subject's productive energy, Li points out that *Ermo* overall expresses skepticism toward the progressive spread of free market capitalism. Drawing on Anthony Giddens' concept of "disembedding" (lifting out of things, people, etc. from their original context), Li argues that Ermo's uneasy journey reflects the conflict between capitalist modernity's promise of individual freedom and the emotional and physical exhaustion of chasing the desired commodity. This film captures the predicament of the Chinese people caught in a rapid economic and social transformation.

While Part I studies the formation of the neoliberal subject wrought by capitalism's resurgence in China, Part II provides a cinematic meditation on neoliberal sociality, namely on how deregulation and self-possessive individualism affect social relations and feelings. In Chapter 3 Li turns to Ang Lee's "father trilogy" – *Pushing Hands* (1992), *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), and *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman* (1994) – and Zhang Yimou's *Happy Times* (2000), and in Chapter 4 to works by Taiwanese New Wave directors Hou Hsiao-hsien and Edward Yang, to demonstrate the contestation of emotion and ethics in contemporary family and individual life.

Chapter 3 takes "(re)production" and "(re)creation" as an interpretative framework. Li explains,

"If precapitalist Chinese communities are rooted in a social order of (re)production that privileges a localized linear temporality, a generative time for species perpetuity, the precipitation of Capital's Second Coming in East Asia disrupts this practice in the promotion of individual (re)creational time." (95)

For Li, the core of capitalism's ethical conflict lies in the irreconcilability between the historical insistence on (re)productive continuity and the modern necessity of (re)creational individuality. Li argues that Ang Lee's father trilogy addresses this conflict and provides either regressive or fantastic solutions. The three films share a similar conflict – the children's predicaments when faced with a choice between



father in *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman*.



The father starts a new family with a much younger woman in the end of *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman*.

Images from *Happy Times*:



The altruist protagonist discusses with his friends on how to help a blind girl in *Happy Times*.



They turn an abandoned factory into a simple massage parlor for the girl.

pursuing their personal happiness and meeting their father's wishes. Thus, in *Pushing Hands*, the son does not know how to solve the conflict between his father and his Caucasian American wife; in *Wedding Banquet*, the gay son fakes a marriage to satisfy his father's wish for grandchildren; and in *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman*, the daughters feel pressured to maintain the family in the old ways valued by their widowed father.

But the films all have a feel-good ending: *Pushing Hands* ends with the father's self-removal from the nuclear family; *Wedding Banquet* ends with a reconciliation between the father and the son, between heterosexuality and homosexuality; and *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman* ends with the father starting a new family with a much younger woman. Li argues that what lies at the core of these solutions is the attenuation of generational affective ties, which is "a precondition of capitalist economic expansion, since the discontinuity of generational rites of passage is presumed to accentuate individual mobility." (98) David Li sees the grandpa's self-removal in *Pushing Hands* as Ang Lee's admission of the necessity for nuclear familial restoration:

"[T]he obsolescence of on-site filial care is as inevitable as the triumph of neoliberal self-care is indisputable." (98)

Li criticizes particularly *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman* as a filmic fantasy of neoliberalism's family values: "the privatization of care" coalesces with "the technology of self-care," which promotes the remaking of the individual in the spirit of endless growth.

While criticizing Ang Lee's trilogy as somewhat socially regressive for displacing questions of social welfare (care for the elderly and the vulnerable), Li finds an "unabashed cinematic argument" for "the ethic of care" in Zhang Yimou's *Happy Times*, a film about a middle-aged man trying to help a blind girl who is abandoned by her biological father. The film calls attention to the pressing needs of the disabled and the immobile, exposes a reality to which global capitalism turns a blind eye, and raises critical questions about social responsibility. Li maintains that Zhang's film offers a cinematic model of cosmopolitan collectivity, a conscientious form of affiliation extending beyond the biological and the nuclear family. Through the altruist protagonist, Li argues, Zhang proposes an alternative conception of emotional economy that integrates individual fulfillment with nurturing sites of social continuity.

Chapter 4 studies productions by two filmmakers raised in Taiwan: Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Three Times* and Edward Yang's "monadic trilogy," *A Confucian Confusion* (1994), *Mahjong/Majang* (1996), and *Yi Yi: A One and a Two* (2000). Li shows how these films represent "emotional capitalism." Hou's *Three Times* consists of three romance stories set in different periods: the Taiwanese industrialization in 1966 ("Dreams of Romance"), the Chinese Republican Revolution in 1911 ("Dreams of Liberty"), and globalization of capitalism circa 2005 ("Dreams of Youth"). "Dreams of Romance" celebrates a monogamous coupling based on reciprocity of autonomous selfhood in a period of welfare capitalism in Taiwan. It contrasts to the unequaled gender politics in "Dreams of Liberty" and emotional desperation and desolation as a result of rapid accumulation of profits and pleasures in "Dream of Youth." Li argues that the achronological arrangement of the storylines reveals Hou's evaluation of the three historical moments – "Dream of Romance," set in 1966, being the most humane and liberating story, and thus the best of times.

Among Yang's trilogy, Li views *Yi Yi*, a portrayal of a multigenerational middle-class family in Taipei, as the most incisive in its artistic grappling with the economic and emotional phenomena of Capital's Second Coming. To analyze this film, Li proposes "reflexive modernity" as his theoretical frame. At the core of reflexive modernity is reflexive individualization, which is "a concerted call to liberate individuals from the postwar welfare capitalism of democratic nation-





The happy moment shared between the two unrelated characters celebrates a conscientious form of affiliation beyond the biological and the nuclear family.

Images from *Yi Yi*:



Yang uses the glass motif to reflect the transnational and postmodern space his characters traverse in his film *Yi Yi*.



*Yi Yi* ends with the couple's decision to stay together, suggesting a shared refusal of endless emotional experiments

Images from *Sill Life*:

states,” to free individuals from communal ties, from ethical content. (146) Through insightful analysis of the film’s depictions of family relations, marriage and romance, as well as the mise-en-scene of the city space (for instance the use of abundant glass in metropolitan architecture to reflect a transnational space), Li argues that *Yi Yi* offers an unflinching critique of reflexive modernity. Further, it emphasizes ethical imperatives, conveyed most incisively in the film’s ending, with the couple’s decision to stay together. The couple’s reconciliation indicates a shared refusal of endless emotional experiments,

“a caution against reckless movements and unbridled mobility in the Second Coming of Capital.” (159)

The last two chapters of the book, which comprise Part III, are devoted to Jia Zhangke, the leading figure of China’s “Sixth Generation” filmmakers, and Fruit Chan, a renowned independent Hong Kong filmmaker. Li presents a strong case that Jia’s neorealist style in *Still Life* (2006), with its focus on daily reality and socially marginalized groups, serves as aesthetic resistance to neoliberalism’s “creative destruction.” Jia’s sympathetic and affective representation of the male protagonist, representing the laboring people who are left behind by capitalism’s fast-turning wheels, expresses the director’s ethical commitment to “solidarity and equality as well as an artistic revision of the neoliberal teleology of history.” (193) The male protagonist’s unwavering affective allegiance to his wife represents for Li

“the affirmative structures of feeling and resources of resistance to the forward motion of creative destruction.” (193)

Jia’s warning against neoliberalism’s “creative destruction” is invoked in the film’s closing image of a stick figure suspended on a high wire between two partially demolished buildings. In this strong section of the book, Li’s commentary seems as profound and powerful as Jia’s visual symbolism:

“For the citizens of the world to avoid their fall over the man-made abyss hollowed by the hunger of constant creative destruction and to secure the continuous survival and thriving of the earth and its species, as Jia indicates with his closing image, a political and planetary common must be imagined, and limits to endless capitalist growth evoked and enforced in perpetuity.” (194)

The book ends with an allegorical reading of Fruit Chan’s *Dumplings*, a dark horror film about anthropophagy. A woman’s secret fountain of youth turns out to be dumplings made of unborn fetuses. Li views *Dumplings* as a “cinematic allegorization of capitalism qua cannibalism.” (206) He describes neoliberal capitalism’s subordination of societal interests, its incitation of excessive appetites, and its speculation of growth beyond limits as cannibalistic. Through a close analysis of *Dumplings*, particularly of its disturbing ending, Li argues that this postmodern horror film portrays cannibal capitalism’s creative destruction at its own peril. Li concludes that Chan compels us to

“abide by nature’s (re)productive time, encouraging a world democracy of effective regulation and equitable distribution for the collective thriving of our planet and its living beings.” (218)

*Economy, Emotion, and Ethics in Chinese Cinema* probes contemporary Chinese cinema with political insight, philosophical depth, and critical poignancy. Li’s



A couple who have benefited from capitalism's Second Coming go their separate ways in Jia's *Still Life*.



The protagonist, who belongs to the group left behind by capitalism's wheels, shows unwavering affective allegiance to his wife.



*Still Life* closes with the image of a stick figure suspended on a high wire between two partially demolished buildings.

passionate and eloquent analysis of the narratives and imagery of some compelling films made in the PRC, Taiwan and Hong Kong strongly demonstrates Chinese cinema's engagement with the development of global capitalism and modernity and its simultaneous critique of neoliberalism. Though existing scholarship on Chinese-language cinema has touched on the subject of film reflecting and/or confronting capitalist modernity in the Sinophone world,[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Li's work is a much more dense and substantial study, offering a profound "tracking shot of Chinese cinema's creation of figures/forms/images about Capitalism's Second Coming" (10). The book thus forms a dialogue with other approaches to nation, subjectivity, and transnational identity in Chinese-language films.[2] It can be of great value and interest to graduate students and scholars who are interested in contemporary Chinese cinema or China's social and economic transformation in the last three decades.

The book has its limits and challenges. First, though Li's approach is to engage in a dialogue between the film medium and social and political theory on capitalist modernity, the theoretical aspects sometimes take over and run their own course. Second, the selection of the film texts only includes works by critically acclaimed male directors: Zhang Yimou, Zhang Yuan, Jia Zhangke, Ang Lee, Hou Hsiao-Hsian, Edward Yang, and Fruit Chan. Chan's *Dumplings*, of course, is based on the acclaimed Lillian Lee novel and highlights a woman's perspective on capitalism at the Hong Kong/PRC border.

Nevertheless, Li's book would be stronger and more convincing if it included studies of contemporary women directors' works and their insights on society and individual subjectivity under the influence of rapid capitalist implementation. For instance, Hong Kong filmmaker Ann Hui's *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt* (2005) is a poignant cinematic look at the impact of social and economic transformation on ordinary people's lives. Other influential women directors include Peng Xiaolian (*Shanghai Story/Meili Shanghai*, 2004), Ning Ying (*For Fun/Zhao Le*, 1993; *On the Beat/Mingjing gushi*, 1995), and Sylvia Chang (*Tempting Heart*, 1999; *20 30 40*, 2004). *Chinese Women's Cinema: Transnational Contexts* (Wang 2001), an anthology that centers on women filmmakers from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Chinese diaspora, would provide a valuable complement to Li's work.[3]

Another weakness is Li's non-differentiated approach to the PRC, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, as laid out above. Though they share, in some ways, a similar compressed capitalist development, different political structures and historical factors complicate the formation and remaking of the Chinese neoliberal subject. For example, Taiwan's capitalist development cannot be fully grasped without considering Japan's occupation of the island (1895-1945) and the imposition of martial law (1949-1987). Similarly, the 1997 handover of Hong Kong to the PRC arguably has posed greater anxiety for the citizens of Hong Kong than the spread of capitalism in the last two decades of the twentieth century. In addition, distinctive film cultures and industries in the three geopolitical territories have influenced the way filmmakers react to "Chinese-ness" and to Capitalism's "Second Coming".[4] Ignoring those specificities, Li's approach simplifies the construction and (re)forming of the Chinese subject in the Sinophone world.

Despite its limitations, *Economy, Emotion, and Ethics in Chinese Cinema* stands as an important and ambitious scholarly interpretation of contemporary Chinese cinema in relation to criticism of neoliberal capitalism. Its dialogue between film

and social and political theory makes the book a valuable addition to both film scholarship and cultural studies. We have to agree with Li that

“We cannot think about culture without simultaneously thinking about it through material history.” (102)

Li proves his insightfulness through his perceptive analysis of culture/cinema in the throes of the formidable progress of capitalism.

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## Notes

1. For example, Lu, Hongwei. "From Routes to Roots or Vice Versa: Transformation of Urban Space in China's 'New Urban Films.'" *Asian Cinema* 19, no. 2 (2008): 102–34 (an article exploring how interpersonal, familial, and social relationships are shaped by the PRC's transition to a market economy and rapid urbanization). Also see Lu, Tonglin. *Confronting Modernity in the Cinemas of Taiwan and Mainland China*. Cambridge, U.K. ; New York : Cambridge University Press, 2002 (a deconstructionist analysis of cinematic texts in terms of modernity and globalization). [[return to page 1](#)]

2. To list a few: Lu, Sheldon H. and Emilie Yueh-Yu Yeh, eds. *Chinese-Language Film: Historiography, Poetics, Politics*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005 (a comprehensive anthology offering insights into contemporary films in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan); Chow, Rey., *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility*. Film and Culture. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007 (a study of films from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Chinese Americans on issues such as exile, migration, kinship, and commodification); Lee, Vivian P. Y. *Hong Kong Cinema since 1997: The Post-Nostalgic Imagination*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009 (an exploration of post-1997 Hong Kong cinema in terms of the confronting issues of time, memory, and schizophrenia across different genres); and Berry, Chris, and Fei Lu, eds. *Island on the Edge: Taiwan New Cinema and After*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005 (an anthology that tackles issues problematized in Taiwan New Cinema from the early 1980s onward).

3. Wang, Lingzhen, ed. *Chinese Women's Cinema: Transnational Contexts*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

4. See Zhu, Ying. *Chinese Cinema during the Era of Reform: The Ingenuity of the System*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003 (one of the earliest book-length explorations of Chinese film industry since the 1980s, and an examination of China's systematic transformation in terms of cultural policy and New Wave filmmaking); Zhu, Ying and Stanley Rosen, eds. *Art, Politics, and Commerce in Chinese Cinema*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010 (an anthology focusing on the film industry and market); and Marchetti, Gina, and Tan See-Kam. *Hong Kong Film, Hollywood and the New Global Cinema: No Film Is an Island*. London: Routledge, 2007 (an anthology highlighting the relationship between the Hong Kong New Wave and its legacy within a global marketplace dominated by Hollywood).



# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Anthony Wong, gay activist, actor, and popular singer.



Denise Ho, lesbian celebrity, activist, actress, and Cantopop singer.



Anthony Wong in background, wearing one of his signature pork pie hats and spectacles, as part of the crowd under the Rainbow Flag

## Sexual citizenship and social justice in the HKSAR: Evans Chan's *Raise the Umbrellas* (2016)

by [Gina Marchetti](#)

In 1998, Jeffrey Weeks published an article entitled “The Sexual Citizen” in the journal *Theory, Culture and Society*.<sup>[1]</sup> [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) In it, he notes the importance of the conjuncture of the traditionally private realms of gender, sexuality, subjectivity, and erotic identity with the rights of citizenship, including access to public space, free assembly, equal accommodation, and, of course, full suffrage. During Hong Kong’s 2014 Umbrella Movement, a broad coalition of political groups and individuals banded together to occupy the territory’s streets to protest the Chinese Central Government’s interpretation of the territory’s Basic Law. The issue that divided families and communities involved the question of universal suffrage and restrictions on the right to run and hold public office. Local and international media galvanized attention on the mass protests, and scholars from a range of disciplines have subsequently analyzed the movement.<sup>[2]</sup> However, although LGBTQ and feminist organizations as well as individuals played significant roles in the demonstrations, a full accounting of the importance of these sexual citizens to Hong Kong’s political development has yet to be done.

Films made after the events that reflect on the movement and its impact provide a starting point. Evans Chan’s documentary *Raise the Umbrellas* stands out in this regard because it devotes considerable screen time to Anthony Wong and Denise Ho, two popular entertainers who openly advocate for gender and sexual equality. Collaborating with female cinematographers, including Nate Chan and Nora Lam, who, individually made their own films about the demonstrations, Evans Chan highlights the importance of the rights of women and sexual minorities to the struggle for suffrage and self-determination in Hong Kong. This analysis of *Raise the Umbrellas* attempts to tease out the vital connection between social justice and sexual citizenship to better appreciate the role feminist and LGBTQ perspectives play in the forging of democracy in Hong Kong.

### “I’m just a CITIZEN.” Intersectionality, suffrage, and sexual citizenship in Hong Kong

Near the conclusion of Chan’s *Raise the Umbrellas*, Anthony Wong says the following about his involvement with the Umbrella Movement:

“Is the 79 day Occupy meaningless? It’s meaningful enough to turn be into a different person. In the past, I saw myself as an artiste. Now I’m just like everybody offstage. I’m just a CITIZEN.”

Within the film, Anthony Wong serves as the most prominent example of the link between sexual identity and commitment to democratic reforms.



Anthony Wong and Denise Ho on the streets.



Tear gas and the birth of the Umbrella Movement.



Speaking on behalf of himself and Denise Ho, he says:

“What made a lesbian and a gay man Hong Kong entertainment’s loudest supporters of democracy? Because they both understand the pressure put on an oppressed minority.”

Given the historical struggle of women and sexual minorities for basic rights around the world, the fundamental importance of suffrage as one part of full participation in society as citizens comes into sharp focus. As privileged celebrities, Wong and Ho spotlight the often-neglected importance of issues involving gender and sexuality to the wider democracy movement. Wong articulates the importance of collective action to his sexual citizenship, and this becomes a central theme in Chan’s film. However, Wong’s transformation was not the intended aim of the movement, but, arguably, it became one of its most significant consequences.

In fact, the occupation of Hong Kong’s Admiralty, Causeway Bay, and Mongkok districts September through December, 2014, did not achieve its principal goals of electoral reform and the resignation of Chief Executive C.Y. Leung. Set off in response to a White Paper from the Chinese State Council in Beijing putting severe limitations on eligibility to run for Chief Executive and making “universal suffrage” promised for 2017 largely meaningless, what had been originally scheduled as Occupy Central with Peace and Love, organized by Reverend Chu Yiu-ming, Benny Tai, and Chan Kin-man, became part of a broader coalition headed by student leaders, including Joshua Wong, Alex Chow, Lester Shum, Nathan Law, and Yvonne Leung, among many others. When demonstrators raised umbrellas to protect themselves from a police assault with tear gas on September 28, 2014, the “Umbrella Movement” was born.

With a very basic call for meaningful suffrage at its core, the occupation gathered strength from a wide variety of sources with conflicting political viewpoints, personal histories, and levels of commitment. Hong Kong’s protests have much in common with other grassroots calls for progressive political change; however, Hong Kong’s particular position as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People’s Republic of China operating under the “one country, two systems” policy that guarantees a “high degree” of—but far from absolute—autonomy to the former British colony makes its situation unique.[3] While “pro-Establishment” politicians and their cohort see their fortunes inevitably tied to mainland China, Occupy demonstrators and their supporters cling to the promise of local governance and self-determination for Hong Kong.

Chan’s documentary *Raise the Umbrellas* gives voice to a wide range of players across the political spectrum, including pro-Establishment stalwart, Jasper Tsang, former president of the Legislative Council, a participant in the anti-colonial 1967 riots, whose brother, Tsang Tak-sing, went to jail for leftwing political activities. Anti-Establishment democracy advocates such as Benny Tai, Martin Lee, and “Long Hair” Leung Kwok-Hung also receive a fair share of screen time. The film includes scholars such as the late Arif Dirlik, author of *Modernity in the Age of Global Capitalism*; Hector Rodriguez, City University of Hong Kong; and, Andrew Nathan, Columbia University, board member of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED); and it references diverse thinkers including Martin Luther King, Hannah Arendt, and George Orwell. Working within the framework of the essay film, Chan’s point of view emerges through editing choices; however, he does allow a range of voices to surface that point to contradictions within the movement as well as the perspective of the opposition. In spite of this, Chan has encountered difficulties showing his film in Hong Kong,[5] accused of producing a partisan document, and its critical reception has been mixed.

The focus here, however, is not on the controversy surrounding the film or



Director Evans Chan's perspective emerges through the montage of the sounds and images collected during the demonstrations and in interviews after the fact.

even the principal figures featured in the documentary, but on demonstrators who bring gender and sexuality into the public arena through their participation in the movement. *Raise the Umbrellas* illustrates the movement's capacity to represent the intersectional interests of citizens marginalized or silenced by the political status quo. Chan's film is exemplary in this regard, since it showcases the participation of women and sexual minorities in the demonstrations not only as individual citizens but as members of underrepresented populations with a particular stake in the healthy functioning of the democratic public sphere.

*Raise the Umbrellas*, then, rebalances the tendency of many media depictions of the protests to downplay the importance of intersections of gender and sexuality in fuelling the demonstrations. Oppressed because of their gender and/or sexual orientation, many activists take to the streets to demand a voice within a larger movement advocating for open elections and public debate. In fact, it can be argued that the movement's credibility would be lessened considerably without the support of individuals and organizations advocating for women's equality and LGBTQ rights.

## Debating sexual citizenship

In 1993, David T. Evans published a book entitled *Sexual Citizenship: The Material Construction of Sexualities* providing the foundation for the critical examination of the ways in which sexuality operates in the public sphere. In his 1998 essay on the subject, Jeffrey Weeks underscores the centrality of the franchise to the full exercise of sexual citizenship:

“The idea of sexual citizenship has many features in common with other claims to citizenship. It is about enfranchisement, about inclusion, about belonging, about equity and justice, about rights balanced by new responsibilities. What is different about it is that it is bringing to the fore issues and struggles that were only implicit or silenced in earlier notions of citizenship.”[6]

Paralleling the long struggle for voting rights by African Americans in the United States (culminating in the Voting Rights Act of 1965), women around the world also struggled for full political participation throughout the twentieth century (with the partial franchise in 1918 in the United Kingdom, equal franchise in 1928; national women's suffrage in the United States in 1920; women's right to vote nationally in Switzerland in 1971, in all local jurisdictions by 1991). Article 21 of the United Nation's Declaration of Human Rights (1948) guarantees “universal and equal suffrage.” While women now go to the polls in most parts of the world, their meaningful participation in the political arena reflects the gender hierarchy of the broader society. Racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities as well as women suffer, and those at the intersection of these markers of difference in society, as Kimberlé Crenshaw[7] points out, face even greater challenges. Economic inequality, political exclusion, gender-based harassment, and violence against women take their toll on the body politic and make inclusive democracy an unrealized aspiration in far too many parts of the world.

Misogyny and homophobia mean that recognizing women and sexual minorities as full “citizens” must be a critical aspect of any push for democracy, and the importance of inclusion to the Umbrella Movement testifies to its strength in empowering those with a particular stake in seeing a just society for historically oppressed and marginalized groups. In fact, Hong Kong's protests provide only one example of the many grassroots demonstrations that agitate for political reform around the world. As such, the Umbrella Movement has much in common with the 1989 demonstrations in Tian'anmen Square as well as the more recent Occupy Wall Street protests. While the economic roots of the 1989 Beijing protests are often underplayed, the importance of political as well as fiscal reforms to the demonstrators in

Zuccotti Park has not been given sufficient attention. Sexual citizenship also played a role in Beijing as seen in fictionalized accounts of 1989 such as Stanley Kwan's epic gay romance, *Lan Yu* (2001), a film based on a 1998 Internet novel.[8] As many scholars have shown, Occupy Wall Street not only owed a debt to feminism and women activists,[9] but included explicit critiques of the electoral system because of its suppression of the female vote and queer representation.

Demands for sexual citizenship, however, have also generated controversy in the aftermath of 9/11 and a global call to arms based, in part, on the racist perception that the Muslim world suffers more acutely from an authoritarian lack of democracy as well as misogyny and homophobia than the rest of the globe. In "Rethinking Sexual Citizenship", Diane Richardson recognizes a tendency toward Orientalism based on "Eurocentric notions of cosmopolitanism" [10] in some of the discourse surrounding the status of women and sexual minorities across Asia. Imperialists use appeals for democracy, liberty, and the uplift of women and oppressed minorities as justification for invasion, colonization, and subjugation of other lands and peoples.

However, the local/global dimension of sexual citizenship cannot fall victim to this instrumental use of feminist and queer calls for suffrage. As *Raise the Umbrellas* demonstrates, the power of having the "whole world watching"[11] protests in a particular location strengthens not only local support but can help create a political climate that makes it more difficult for oppressive powers to suppress demands for change. Few countries court ostracism because of their poor treatment of their own citizens, so the perception of fair governance can make a difference to trade and geopolitical influence across borders. Taiwan, for example, has been a leader in the Chinese-speaking world in reforms opening the road for same-sex marriage even though female president Tsai Ing-Wen wavered in her initial support for marriage equality. [12] Although Hong Kong now has a female Chief Executive, Carrie Lam, it lags behind in granting equal rights to its LGBTQ citizens.

The People's Republic does not compare favorably to either Taiwan or Hong Kong in female participation in political office (with 95% of the Central Committee male in 2017 and no female head of state following the establishment of the PRC in 1949)[13] or in granting equal rights to the LGBTQ community. While no laws against homosexuality exist in mainland China, LGBTQ individuals suffer from social opprobrium, political marginalization, police harassment, as well as homophobic violence.[14]

Petrus Liu's ruminations on the potentialities of a "queer Marxism" leave Hong Kong mainly out of the picture in a study of the intellectual and artistic intersections of anti-capitalism and sexual orientation in the "two Chinas" of the PRC and Taiwan.[15] Critical of parliamentary government because the pressure elected politicians face when courting votes can compromise positions favoring gender equality and LGBTQ rights, Liu points to the tension between activism and electoral politics at the root of splits within the feminist movement in Taiwan. He observes:

"Under the constraints of liberal pluralist electoral politics, mainstream feminists are either conservative or at best centrist, while truly progressive social movements are left in the hands of *nonstatist* feminists."

*Raise the Umbrella* highlights a similar tension between activists working outside the system and elected politicians on both sides of the suffrage debate. Given limitations on suffrage, inevitable crises in the legitimacy of the government punctuate Hong Kong's history before and after the 1997 Handover. As a result, the clear division between "outside" activists and "inside" elected officials does not always hold, and the territory has seen

activists win elections—including the radical “Long Hair” Leung Kwok-Hung, seldom seen without his Che Guevara shirt. Because of the constraints placed on elected representation throughout its history, Hong Kong boasts a strong culture of effective street protest as well as a vocal oppositional presence in its legislature. The very broad coalition that opposes the authoritarian imposition of rule on Hong Kong by both the former British colonizers and current mainland Chinese authorities includes diverse perspectives on participatory democracy, governance, economic and social justice.

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## Demands for inclusion: two histories of Hong Kong protests

Two political histories of Hong Kong coexist in *Raise the Umbrellas*. One deals with the quest for universal suffrage from the colonial era to the clearing of the occupation sites in December 2014. This history of street demonstrations and protests parallels the story of the development of Hong Kong's democratic institutions beginning in the colonial era and continuing under "one country, two systems" as part of the implementation of the Basic Law. As Antony Dapiran points out in his book, *City of Protest: A Recent History of Dissent in Hong Kong*:

"Past experiences had shown that 'demonstrations in the streets' were indeed a more effective means of achieving change in Hong Kong than participating in the political system." [17] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

Quoting Chris Patten, Hong Kong's last colonial governor, Dapiran points out that this situation is a consequence of the fact that the territory's citizens enjoy a high degree of "liberty without democracy." [18] Thus, Hong Kong's political process functions through a very limited representative government as well as through public protests. Elections have meaning, but bodies in the streets can also be powerful political forces in the territory. [19]

The other history involves women and sexual minorities, which intrudes on this more direct timeline of the territory's chronology in subtle, but insistent ways. Women became increasingly visible in colonial Hong Kong as political forces in the 1960s, and the Hong Kong Council of Women (HKCW) agitated for gender equality in the 1970s. Hong Kong's prestigious and influential Lesbian and Gay International Film Festival had its premiere in 1989. In 1991, the same year that same-sex relations were decriminalized in the colony, Emily Lau, who figures prominently as a voice for democratic reform in *Raise the Umbrellas*, became the first woman directly elected to LegCo. Particularly in the years leading up to the 1997 Handover, key issues such as female inheritance and property rights of villagers in the rural New Territories, sexual discrimination in public accommodation and employment, and violence against women became points of public concern and debate. In 1995-6, several laws went into effect including the Sex Discrimination Ordinance as well as the Disability Discrimination Ordinance, and the Equal Opportunities Commission was established to oversee the implementation of this legislation. Film director Stanley Kwan publicly announced his homosexuality in 1996, and popular entertainer and film star Leslie Cheung came out in 1997.

After the Handover, Hong Kong continued to reach civil rights milestones such as equality in the age of consent for homosexuals and heterosexuals (2006), the first official Gay Pride Parade (2008), and the validation of marriages for transsexuals. However, even though Hong Kong, unlike the United States, is a signatory of Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), no laws prevent discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or age. Women and sexual minorities face violence, harassment, unfair labor practices, and unequal opportunities due to sex and gender discrimination often coupled, as in the case of foreign domestic workers, with ethnic and class prejudices. [20] Thus, this second

chronology highlights the particular ways in which suffrage intersects with the struggle for LGBTQ and women's rights.

Although she does not appear in *Raise the Umbrellas*, groundbreaking political figure Elsie Tu connects both versions of the territory's history. Because Tu passed away during the production of the film in 2015, at the age of 102, Chan dedicates the film to her as a tribute to her efforts to democratize Hong Kong. Her story sheds light on the background connecting sexual citizenship, which Tu vocally advocated, with the Umbrella Movement, which she vehemently opposed.

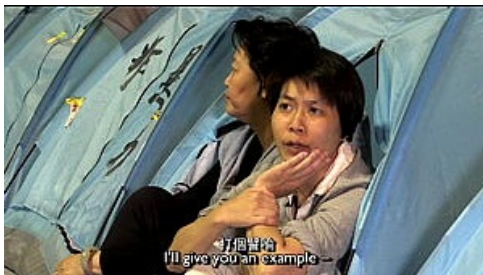
Elected to the colonial Urban Council in 1963 when she still went by her married name of Elsie Elliott, the former missionary became a champion for workers' rights during the 1966 Star Ferry riots against a fare increase that would burden Hong Kong's poor. Throughout her political career, Tu advocated for gay rights, including the decriminalization of homosexuality, and served as a pioneering woman in the territory's male-dominated Legislative Council (LegCo). As a committed opponent of British colonialism, she supported China's claims to sovereignty.



Elsie Tu reading from her autobiography in *To Liv(e)*.

Tu appears in *To Liv(e)* (1992), Chan's first feature film, playing a version of herself reading from her autobiography as well as interacting with the fictional characters in the film. *To Liv(e)*, in fact, illustrates the growing rift between anti-colonial, pro-China political forces and supporters of the 1989 Tian'anmen demonstrators, nervous about the way in which Hong Kong's aspirations for universal suffrage and judicial autonomy would be interpreted after the crackdown. After 1997, Tu alienated many in the anti-Establishment camp because of her support for China's vision of Hong Kong's future even after the June 4, 1989, suppression of China's democracy demonstrators put Beijing's commitment to political reform in doubt.[21] Tu appears only in the dedication of *Raise the Umbrellas*; however, her legacy can be felt in the film in the way political alliances cross ideological divides involving women's and LGBTQ rights finds expression.

Several women in the HKSAR government opposed to the demonstrators make an appearance in *Raise the Umbrellas*, including Carrie Lam, who would become Hong Kong's first female chief executive in 2017, as well as Priscilla Leung and Starry Lee, both LegCo members who condemned the protests as "illegal" by making "unconstitutional demands for open nomination." Offering examples of what Petrus Liu might call conservative statist feminists, these women see no connection between women's rights, sexual citizenship, and genuine suffrage. However, as Chan's film clearly shows, this disconnect hides the inextricable tie between full political participation and the rights of women and sexual minorities.



A woman interviewed in *Raise the Umbrellas* gives the example of a woman forced to choose among a group of jerks for a prospective husband as an analogy for the injustice of the limitation on the number of candidates allowed to run for Hong Kong's Chief Executive post.

Looking at Hong Kong's political situation from a female point of view, one woman interviewed in *Raise the Umbrellas* expresses her frustration with the proposal to limit the number of candidates able to run for Chief Executive by comparing it to a woman asked by her parents to pick a husband from among a sorry selection of available men: "How can anyone choose?" Although women such as Emily Lau and Carrie Lam on opposite sides of the political spectrum serve as elected members of the government, frustrations with Hong Kong's lack of genuine suffrage coupled with inadequate provisions for women and sexual minorities push many out into the streets to demand inclusive democratic reform. In *Hatred of Democracy*, Jacques Ranciere makes a similar point about the inherent irony of this situation:

"... 'women's and citizen's rights' are the rights of those who have not the rights that they have and have the rights that they have not...they also exercise, by their action, the citizen's rights that the law refuses them. They demonstrate in this way that they do have the rights denied them." [22]

Adding sexual minorities as “citizens” with “women” to Rancière’s discussion, the Umbrella Movement illustrates the intersection of democracy with gender and sexual identities as the rights of citizens often outside of legal protections pushed into the streets to make their demands heard through acts of civil disobedience such as occupying public space.

*Raise the Umbrellas* brings this particular aspect of the 2014 protests to the screen by focusing on women demonstrators and LGBTQ occupiers who prove that they have the right to assemble, associate, and express their opinions even though the exercise of those rights fall outside the law. The sexual citizen, therefore, emerges as the central protagonist of Chan’s vision of the movement. Because of immigration laws and failure to recognize same-sex marriages,[23] some women and sexual minorities already find themselves outside the law, so civil disobedience extends beyond the illegal occupation of public streets to the intimacy of the bedroom. Casey Kwok Ka-chai of HER Fund, an NGO which helps raise money for women’s organizations, calls for the recognition of the “hidden women” in the struggle for democracy in Hong Kong:

“After the Umbrella Movement, it is clear that we care about the democratic movement in Hong Kong, but I really believe feminism perfects a democracy.”[24]

Using *Raise the Umbrellas* as a lens on women and sexual minorities in the movement, the fundamental importance of feminist and queer participation in the democratic struggle can be recognized and better appreciated.

## The transnational politics of citation

At around the same time *Raise the Umbrellas* was in production, two major motion pictures directed by women filmmakers dealing expressly with suffrage gained international recognition. Both films highlight the relationship between sexual citizenship and electoral politics in ways that resonate with Hong Kong’s Umbrella protests by illustrating the centrality of suffrage to civil rights movements. *Suffragette* (2015), directed by Sarah Gavron and written by Abi Morgan, looks back at the events leading up to the trampling death of Emily Wilding Davison (played by Natalie Press) in 1913 at the Epsom Derby, where she was engaged in a protest to support women’s suffrage in the United Kingdom. The year of the film’s release, 2015, marked the twentieth anniversary of the United Nation’s Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, and Gavron’s film resonated with other events happening concurrently, including Hillary Clinton’s bid to become the first female president of the United States. On the eve of Women’s Day, March 8, 2015, the mainland Chinese government detained five feminist activists, subsequently known as the “Feminist Five” (Li Maizi, Wei Tingting, Zheng Churan, Wu Rongrong, and Wang Man), planning to put up stickers against sexual harassment and other forms of violence against women.[25] Engaging in acts of civil disobedience such as putting up posters in public places provides one of the few ways that women in mainland China can express their discontent with government policies. While the Chinese constitution guarantees suffrage for men and women,[26] the exercise of the franchise has considerable limitations in the one-party state, and many women, such as the Feminist Five look to street actions to make their case for women’s rights.

*Suffragette* engendered its share of criticism for ignoring the contribution of women from outside of Europe to the cause for women’s enfranchisement in England by neglecting prominent historical figures such as Princess Sophia



Natalie Press as historical figure Emily Wilding Davison and Carey Mulligan as fictional Maud Watts.





Common with John Legend at the Academy Awards talking about Hong Kong as referenced in *Raise the Umbrellas*.



Martin Luther King on the bridge in *Selma*, March 30, 1965.



*Selma* (2014).

Alexandra Duleep Singh and publicizing the film with a racially insensitive campaign featuring “I’d rather be a rebel than a slave,” worn on teeshirts by the all-white women in the cast and seen, by some, as a veiled reference to the Confederacy.[27] The film did make a working-class campaigner, Maud Watts (Carey Mulligan) the protagonist of the story, but, as a fictionalized composite character, she did not bring the same historical weight as Emily Wilding Davison or Emmeline Pankhurst (played by Meryl Streep).

Although *Suffragette* did showcase women’s rights and the franchise in 2015, *Selma* (2014), directed by Ava DuVernay, had a more direct connection to the Umbrella Movement through the link made between Hong Kong and Selma by Common at the 87th Academy Awards ceremony on February 22, 2015. When accepting his Oscar (with John Legend) for the original song, “Glory,” Common made the following statement:

“First I would like to thank God that lives in us all. Recently John and I got to go to Selma and perform ‘Glory’ on the same bridge that Dr. King and the people of the Civil Rights movement marched on 50 years ago. This bridge was once a landmark of a divided nation, but now it’s a symbol for change. The spirit of this bridge transforms race, gender, religion, sexual orientation and social status. The spirit of this bridge connects the kid from the South side of Chicago dreaming of a better life to those in France standing up for their freedom of expression, to the people in Hong Kong protesting for democracy. This bridge was built on hope, welded with compassion and elevated by love for all human beings.”

Common highlights intersectional dimensions of citizenship by underscoring gender and sexual orientation in addition to race and social status (which I read as “class”) in his acceptance speech. However, more than this, he notes the impact Martin Luther King’s campaign of nonviolent civil disobedience has had on Hong Kong’s protests.

DuVernay keeps women front and center in her visualization of “Bloody Sunday,” particularly in her portrayal of Coretta Scott King (Carmen Ejogo), Diane Nash (Tessa Thompson), and Annie Lee Cooper (Oprah Winfrey). She also recognizes the participation of gay men such as Bayard Rustin (Ruben Santiago-Hudson).[28] In *Selma*, King’s explanation to LBJ of the importance of full suffrage to achieve civil rights through the power of voting out racists and running for office to redress historical imbalances speaks to the significance of the full franchise to women and sexual minorities as well. Evans Chan directly cites Common and *Selma* in *Raise the Umbrellas*, and the impact of not only MLK’s thoughts on nonviolent protest, civil disobedience, and suffrage, but also the importance of *Selma*’s intersectional view of the movement as an inclusive call for universal suffrage for America’s sexual citizens makes it germane to Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement.[29]

In fact, Common’s involvement with Hong Kong’s suffrage struggle goes beyond this mention of the movement at the Academy Awards. He has vocally supported Jimmy Lai, publisher of *Apple Daily*:

“There are those who, when given the keys to wealth and the perks of the Establishment, choose not to rock the boat because of the backlash they might face. Jimmy Lai is not such a person.”[30]

Lai also appears in *Raise the Umbrellas* as a vigorous supporter of the protests. Chan includes footage in the film referencing *Apple Daily*’s 2015



*Selma* cited in *Raise the Umbrellas*. Poster superimposed over the occupation site.



*Apple Daily* in *Raise the Umbrellas* showcases newspaper reportage on gender-based violence and the poor treatment of foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong.



Anthony Wong and Josephine Koo in *To Liv(e)*.



John Woo's homoerotic experimental film, *Dead*

award for its coverage of the case of Erwiana Sulistyaningsih, a female domestic worker from Indonesia, viciously abused by her employers. Through montage, Chan subtly juxtaposes Lai's support for universal suffrage in Hong Kong and press freedom with investigative journalism involving gender violence, minority rights, and labor issues. The news story implicitly connects democracy to transnational feminism and human rights, and Chan underscores the importance of Hong Kong's suffrage movement reaching beyond the HKSAR.

In addition to these direct and indirect references to *Selma*, Chan also draws on his own oeuvre to enrich *Raise the Umbrellas* with intertextual citations from his other films. Anthony Wong, for example, stars in *To Liv(e)*, and his appearance, along with the dedication to Elsie Tu, strengthens the connection to Chan's critical commentary from an earlier era of democratic struggle under British colonial rule in the years leading up to the 1997 Handover.[31] Made in the wake of Tian'anmen Square demonstrations and the shock of the June Fourth crackdown on the mainland Chinese movement, the film captures the anxieties of many Hong Kong residents faced with the option of emigrating or struggling for clarity on the future governance of the territory. Wong plays a character faced with that choice as well as living with the stigma of an older fiancée deemed inappropriate by his family. Connecting gender, sexuality, and citizenship by weaving the story of Hong Kong together with prominent female characters, actual political figures such as Elsie Tu, and men stigmatized for their romantic choices, *To Liv(e)* establishes the main themes that characterize Chan's oeuvre. In his fiction films such as *To Liv(e)* as well as his documentaries such as *Raise the Umbrellas*, Chan links gender identity and sexuality to democratic participation in governance and the future of Hong Kong. The fiction feature, *The Map Of Sex And Love* (2001), in particular, focuses on questions of sexual citizenship within the Chinese diaspora, and the Handover film *Journey To Beijing* (1998) overlaps with *Raise the Umbrellas*, since both documentaries take a critical look at the ways in which Britain and the PRC mapped the future of Hong Kong under the "one country, two systems" policy.[32]

Like Jean-Luc Godard, Chan weaves prominent public figures into his fiction films; moreover, he consistently intercuts documentary subject matter with moments of theater, dance, concerts, and direct citations of other motion pictures. For example, in *The Life And Times Of Wu Zhongxian* (2003),[33] in addition to citing Augustine Mok Chiu-Yu's Brechtian play based on the life of the eponymous Hong Kong radical activist, Chan includes a lengthy quotation from John Woo's experimental homoerotic short film, *Dead Knot* (co-directed with Sek Kei, 1968), which communicates the interconnections of the personal and political in ways that extend the biographical details of the life of the activist into the times in which the sexuality of the Hong Kong queer citizen came into view on screen.

Gay-straight political solidarity comes to the forefront again in *Raise the Umbrellas* when Anthony Wong mentions the British film, *Pride* (2014), directed by Matthew Warchus, as inspiring his participation in the Umbrella movement. Set during the 1984 coal miners' strike, *Pride* dramatizes the miners' reluctant acceptance of support from an LGBTQ organization that raised money for the strikers because of their empathy for protesters who suffered hostility from police and the mass media. *Pride*, much like *Raise the Umbrellas*, references the conservative Thatcher years, since the miners' strike and the signing of the Joint Accord that set the stage for Hong Kong's change of sovereignty happened in the same year during Margaret Thatcher's time in office.



Visualizing the gay-straight alliance in the British film, *Pride* (2014).

In addition to Anthony Wong, several of Chan's previous collaborators contribute to *Raise the Umbrellas*. The director calls on pianist Margaret Leng Tan, featured in his documentary, *The Sorceress of the New Piano* (2004), to score *Raise the Umbrellas*. Chan collaborated with dance choreographer and film producer Willy Tsao on most of his features beginning with *To Liv(e)*, and dance also features prominently in this film. In fact, the Occupy Movement provided Chan with a perfect fit for his cinematic interest in bringing multi-arts, performance, and political action together. He combines critical commentary with aesthetic contemplation creating a screen forum to process the protests from different perspectives.



Anthony Wong with a pop art painting of Margaret Thatcher and a can of Spam in *Raise the Umbrellas*.



Dance performance in *Raise the Umbrellas*.

Protesters transformed the cityscape through art with sculptures such as Milk's Umbrella Man (resembling Tian'anmen's Goddess of Democracy as well as the US Statue of Liberty) and Lennon Wall made up of post-it notes decorating a public staircase as a tribute to John Lennon and Yoko Ono's protests against the Vietnam War. As Antony Dapiran notes:

"The Umbrella Movement...served as a model for new forms of political engagement through broad community participation in artistic expression, performances and debates. Many of the artists who gained prominence during the Umbrella Movement have continued to find an audience and a following in subsequent years, making ongoing contributions to the cultural life of the city." [34]

The title of Chan's film, in fact, comes from an anthem written for the movement by Lo Hiu-pan after he witnessed the police gassing of the protestors on September 28. [35] *Raise the Umbrellas*, then, exposes the lies behind the truisms that Hong Kong is a cultural desert filled with politically apathetic inhabitants. Given limitations on suffrage, capturing public space through art empowers the territory's citizens by giving them a means of political expression closed to them in the current electoral system.

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# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Some women felt secure at the protests as seen in *Raise the Umbrellas*, while others suffered abuse.



Feminist activist Kani interviewed in Nate Chan's *Can You Hear The Women Sing?*

In addition to intersecting in productive ways with Chan's overall body of work, *Raise the Umbrellas* benefits from intertextual connections to works by women filmmakers who contributed to the project. For example, Ho Yuet-Fung, a noted female producer working between New York and Hong Kong, was instrumental in bringing *Raise the Umbrellas* to the screen. Nora Lam, [36] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] one of the documentary's principal cinematographers, made several films about Hong Kong's political activists, including the short *Midnight in Mong Kok* (2014) as well as the documentary features *Road Not Taken* (2016, with Wong Chun Long) and *Lost in the Fumes* (2017). All three films provide intimate portraits of the toll political involvement takes on those who feel compelled to join the demonstrations.

Female documentarist Nate Chan's *Do You Hear the Women Sing?* (2014), sponsored by the Hong Kong Christian Council Gender Justice Group, looks exclusively at women's participation in the Umbrella Movement.[37] As a supplement to Evans Chan's film, it highlights aspects of women's participation in the protests not covered in the feature documentary. For example, countering former British colonial governor Chris Patten's observation that Hong Kong enjoys a high degree of individual liberty without genuine democracy, Nate Chan's film underscores the fact that women do not enjoy the same level of personal freedom as men. Several interviewees in *Do You Hear the Women Sing?*, for example, talk about threats of rape used to intimidate female protesters and actual sexual assaults committed during the demonstrations. Counter-demonstrators targeted women, adding to family pressures that weighed more heavily on young women activists than on their male peers.

The film provides one particularly egregious example caught on screen of a man pulling at a woman's shirt during a street confrontation. Kani, one of the interviewees in the film identified as a women's rights advocate, analyzes this systematic sexist intimidation of women by noting the patriarchal belief that the best way to control women's behavior is through the threat of violating their sexual purity. As Mabel Au, a representative from Amnesty International, points out in a newspaper interview, women suffered sexual abuse during the protests and police chose to ignore these crimes because the victims were committing acts of civil disobedience at the time of the assaults:

"The authorities have failed in their duty to protect peaceful protesters who came under attack."[38]

In spite of these threats, women turned out in record numbers during the Occupy protests, and these women appear as active participants in *Raise the Umbrellas*. Although female demonstrators crossed generational divides, the presence of university and secondary school students gave the movement a particularly youthful aura. As Lily Kuo and Heather Timmons note in *Quartz*:

"...young women are playing a greater role in Hong Kong's pro-democracy protests than any other political event since the city's return to China from British control in 1997, according to social scientists, former student activists, and academics studying the demonstrations. These include stay-at-home mothers ferrying in supplies, secondary students spearheading art projects, environmentalists running the massive recycling efforts, medical students staffing the first aid tents, and goggles-wearing agitators."[39]



Female protestors in their school uniforms.

However, many young women felt considerable pressure to leave the demonstrations prematurely. Two female students dressed in their school uniforms speak to the particular opprobrium they faced from their families:

“My parents denounce Occupy, saying scum like you are wrecking Hong Kong.”

Agnes Chow, a member of Scholarism instrumental in stopping plans for the implementation of a jingoist national education course in Hong Kong schools, made the following statement about her decision to withdraw from the 2014 protests:

“I have gained respect from everyone around me since I decided to join the social movement...However, this Umbrella Movement has wore me out physically and psychologically, and I am aware that I can no longer bear such a huge pressure. ...I am sorry. But I am only a 17-year-old. I am very lost and tired in front of the exceptional pressure. I hope everyone can respect my decision.”[40]

Not featured in *Raise the Umbrellas*, Chow symbolizes the absence of some key female student leaders because of the particular burden suffered by women demonstrators. In 2018, with several of the principal male student leaders, including Joshua Wong, Nathan Law, and Alex Chow, Agnes Chow (no relation to Alex) decided to run for the Legislative Council; however, she was disqualified before she even had a chance to be on the ballot because she advocates “self-determination” for Hong Kong.[41] In fact, Evans Chan takes up this episode in Agnes Chow’s political career in the documentary, *We Have Boots* (2019), his follow-up to *Raise the Umbrellas*.

In *We Have Boots*, Chan also considers the case of another young woman activist, Yau Wai-ching, who did manage to run and win the 2016 election to LegCo. However, she subsequently was disqualified because of her failure to take the oath of office in an acceptable fashion. In addition to being given a bill for expenses from her very brief stint in the legislature, she has been mocked by her opponents with her portrait displayed on sex dolls in the streets. The misogynist nature of these attacks on young women creates an icy climate for women who attempt to transition from the streets into public office. Threats of sexual violence, humiliation, and actual assault run counter to the professed rights of Hong Kong’s women to participate fully as citizens of the territory. Through direct citations and an intertextual richness brought by Chan’s collaborators, *Raise the Umbrellas* provides a compelling picture of what sexual citizenship in the HKSAR entails for those marginalized and targeted because of their gender and/or sexual orientation.

## Activism and elected office: female faces of democracy in Hong Kong

*Raise the Umbrellas’* connection to *To Liv(e)* extends beyond Elsie Tu and Anthony Wong. In the 1992 film, journalist protagonist, Rubie (Lindzay Chan), writes a series of letters to Scandinavian actress Liv Ullmann questioning her condemnation of colonial Hong Kong’s refugee policy at a particularly sensitive moment after the June Fourth crackdown. *Raise the Umbrellas’* first interview features journalist/politician Emily Lau, a former member of the Legislative Council, speaking of her confrontation of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher regarding the sovereignty of Hong Kong in the mid-1980s. Like the fictional character, Rubie, Lau, who at the time wrote for the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, confronts a European woman about her blindness to the actual geopolitical situation of Hong Kong. Thatcher’s response to Lau’s question about the morality of signing away the future of



Emily Lau in *Raise the Umbrellas*.



Lau analyzes her encounter with Margaret Thatcher by referencing Orwell's *1984*.

the colony's inhabitants dumbfounded her. The Prime Minister (1979-1990) told the journalist that she was the "solitary exception" to general approval of the agreement. Lau found the phrase oddly familiar, and she realized that George Orwell equates "solitary exception" with insanity in his dystopian novel *1984*—referring ironically to the actual year of the Sino-British Joint Accord.[42]

In addition to elected politicians such as Emily Lau, *Raise the Umbrellas* includes extended interviews with three female student activists, Yvonne Leung (21), Jane (22, no surname given), and Vivian Yip (22). Each interviewee illustrates a different aspect of sexual citizenship in the film, and, together with their male peers and women representing an older generation of activists, they provide a composite picture of how issues of gender and sexual identity dovetail with questions of governance and universal suffrage. Yvonne Leung, president of the University of Hong Kong's Student Union, was the only female elected student representative to face off against the authorities in the single televised debate on October 24 between the demonstrators and the government.



Yvonne Leung at the October 24 television debate as seen in *Raise the Umbrellas*.



Carrie Lam at the October 24 television debate as seen in *Raise the Umbrellas*

Sharing the small screen with Carrie Lam on that occasion, Leung held her own through logical argumentation and poise that put the establishment representatives to shame. *Raise the Umbrellas* includes footage that testifies to Leung's strong commitment to peaceful protest as well. In addition to calling for the movement to bring the government to its knees, she also asserts:

"... when you are willing to have some bloodshed for results make sure the person next to you is having the same epiphany."

While Leung represents the student leadership, Jane's testimony illustrates the personal impact participation in the movement has on the lives of female activists. Her story highlights the contradiction she embodies as a Hong Kong woman expected to be a Chinese national, but denied entry into the People's Republic of China. She describes an attempt to cross the border to participate in a photography session for a friend's wedding pictures. Suspecting she would be denied entry into mainland China, she secretly taped her encounter with the border authorities:

"We're enforcing Regulation II to deny you entry. You may be able to enter again in the future. ...Go online to look up the relevant clause and you'll know the reason."



Jane discusses the occupation of Hong Kong's Civic Square.

According to the immigration website, this regulation covers damaged re-entry permits, expired permits, fake permits, and those "without security clearance." As the film confirms, Jane, along with Emily Lau, Leung Kwok-





Vivian Yip considering the cost of an infrastructure project that would benefit mainland China more than Hong Kong residents.



Vivian Yip on her mother's perspective.



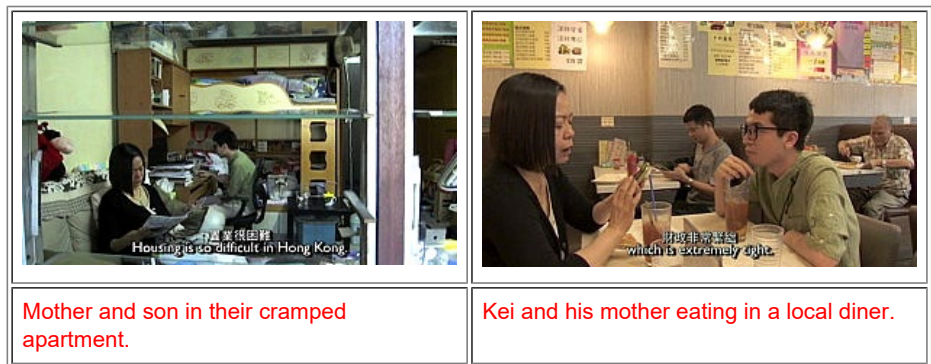
Democratic aspirations and economic realities seen in the depiction of a working class single mother in *Raise the Umbrellas*.

hung ("Long Hair"), Alex Chow, Nathan Law, and Eason Chung are all Hong Kong citizens denied entry into mainland China. Even taking advantage of cheap bridesmaid photos requires security clearance and contributes to activists' sense of alienation from the People's Republic, particularly the Beijing authorities. Although Hong Kong does have some representation in the Central Government in Beijing, citizens of the territory have no suffrage rights in the mainland. Buying into a sense of full citizenship, therefore, stops at the border, and the importance of civil rights on the local rather than national level becomes clear.

Vivian Yip's interview underscores Hong Kong's position as a transnational nodal point for citizens who have connections across the region. Yip, for example, became interested in HKSAR politics because of her opposition to an expensive rail link between the city and mainland China. Interviewed riding on the local MTR public transportation system, the connections between her quotidian life in the city and frustration at her inability to elect representatives, who reflect her economic interests in putting money in local rather than national railway systems, become concrete. The daughter of an Indonesian-Chinese mother, Yip's sense of citizenship extends beyond the People's Republic of China, and she also talks about being an exchange student in Taiwan. Yip has a particularly strong connection with her immigrant mother, and, given Indonesia's history of authoritarian governments, the family may bring that experience to their understanding of what political liberty means in Hong Kong. Yip says the following about her mother's growing awareness:

"Slowly she began to see what my activism is all about—the likely consequence of my arrests. She doesn't have to participate in Occupy to defend this city. I told her she has become an activist by supporting her daughter's activism."

An interview with the mother of another demonstrator sheds light on the way in which class intersects with gender to motivate participation in the movement. Protestor Kei's mother, a cashier at a restaurant, provides moving testimony on the difficulties she faces as a divorced, single mother living in a cramped, government-subsidized flat. She explicitly ties her son's commitment to democratic reform with the need for a system of governance more responsive to the economic needs of the territory's working-class residents.



Referring to her unemployed son's decision to participate in the movement, she says:

"While job-hunting he [Kei] made the most important decision of his life, to stand up for himself. Without the Occupiers, we would have lost our rights."

In addition to a talking head interview with journalist Philip Bowring on the plight of Hong Kong's working poor, Chan includes a title to provide context for the economic basis of their political sentiments:

“Kei and his mom, along with half of Hong Kong’s 7 million people, were low-income folks living in low-income public housing.”

At this point in *Raise the Umbrellas*, the common ground that exists between Occupy Wall Street’s protestors in New York’s Zuccotti Park, and Occupy Hong Kong’s Umbrella activists comes into focus. As a New Yorker himself who has made films such as *Crossings* (1994) and *Bauhinia* (2002) about Hong Kong-New York connections, Chan is in the ideal position to highlight the similarities between the two movements. In the mass media, the economic motivations of many Hong Kong activists take a backseat to anti-Beijing political grievances, while New York’s Occupy Movement has been reduced to a reaction against Wall Street in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis rather than as a broader call for democratic reform. In fact, both movements have both economic and political demands as well as strong calls for an expanded understanding of democracy and sexual citizenship. Occupy Wall Street, for example, included a Feminist General Assembly and explicit calls for political reforms to guarantee political access for all women. As Stephanie Rogers states:

“... a movement claiming to fight for the *disenfranchised* can’t afford to erase the contributions of women.”[43]

By including the testimony of Kei’s mother in *Raise the Umbrellas*, Chan recognizes this critical intersection of class and gender within protestors’ demands for universal suffrage and full citizenship rights in Hong Kong. Just as restrictions on voting rights in many US jurisdictions disproportionately disenfranchise women (particularly minority women) who may not have a driver’s license, time off from domestic chores to vote during a weekday, or who experience other burdens that limit their ability to vote and run for office, Hong Kong women and sexual minorities face similar domestic pressures. These restrictions place an added weight on sexual citizens who struggle for economic rights within the political sphere.

## Solidarity across the sexual divide

In *Raise the Umbrellas*, Denise Ho describes an encounter with an evangelical Christian woman during the demonstrations. Although her conservative church preached against homosexuality as a sin, the young activist changed her mind about LGBTQ rights because of her involvement in the Umbrella movement. Moved by Ho’s dedication to democratic reforms central to freedom of religious as well as sexual expression, she embraced participation in a coalition that included LGBTQ, feminist, and other perspectives very different from her narrow Christian worldview.



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Denise Ho encourages communication across generations and sexual orientations as seen in *Raise the Umbrellas*.



Christian imagery in *Raise the Umbrellas*. Christianity played a key role in Occupy Central with Peace and Love. In the film, Benny Tai speaks of taking inspiration from the Reverend Martin Luther King, and many of the movement leaders speak of their Christian faith and fears of losing religious liberty, including Joshua Wong.



Vivian Yip speaks about the success of the Umbrella Movement in expanding participants' vision of Hong Kong citizenship.

Vivian Yip's comments on the social benefits of Occupy beyond immediate political ends speaks to activism as personal enlightenment as a fundamental part of the success of the Umbrella Movement:

"You may call Occupy a failure, but even as a failure it [has] impact on my generation and the next generation. The widening of our social imagination can only come from a social movement. And probably only a failed movement can so deeply transform our vision."

<http://www.danah.org/papers/2014/DataDiscrimination.pdf>

People who could not envision having anything in common with someone who did not share their sexual orientation or gender identity began to see themselves as citizens equal under the law with a common commitment to full suffrage. Denise Ho expresses this sentiment in a speech captured in Chan's film:

"In the future no matter where you are, remember this moment of solidarity once upon a time in Hong Kong."

During the demonstrations, filmmaker and educator Shu Kei, former dean at the Academy of Performing Arts, introduces Anthony Wong and Denise Ho as part of the LGBTQ support group Shield. The film includes concert footage as well of both Wong's and Ho's 2012 public proclamations of their sexual orientation.



Gay rights activist, filmmaker, and educator Shu Kei introduces Anthony Wong and Denise Ho as part of Shield during the Umbrella movement.



Anthony Wong comes out publicly during a concert performance in 2012.



Denise Ho comes out during the Hong Kong Gay Pride Parade in 2012.

Wong, for example, asserts, "Outing myself onstage was a liberation. Such self-empowerment led me to the frontlines of social movements." Both Wong and Ho articulate the connection between sexuality and liberty in Chan's film and underscore the importance of suffrage to the struggle for LGBTQ rights.

In fact, Wong and Ho continue to suffer financially as a result of their coming out, and they are blacklisted in mainland China. Their political activism





Anthony Wong speaks to the connection between his sexuality and politics as “liberation” in *Raise the Umbrellas*.

within the Umbrella movement has exacerbated these career difficulties. Denise Ho’s arrest during the demonstrations made her an even more visible target. *Raise the Umbrellas* details, in particular, Ho’s trouble with the European cosmetics firm, Lancôme. Using the excuse of the need for additional security costs because of Ho’s notoriety, the company cancelled a concert because Ho’s political activism might upset mainland audiences. Undaunted, Ho raised funds to produce her own show after Lancôme cut its ties with the controversial performer.



Denise Ho arrested during the Occupy demonstrations.



Sporting a blond hairdo, Ho defies Lancôme’s attempts to keep her out of the public eye.



Rainbow and yellow umbrellas on Hong Kong’s street in a show of solidarity as seen in *Raise the Umbrellas*.

In *Raise the Umbrellas*, the celebration of the solidarity between the student activists and Hong Kong’s LGBTQ community climaxes during the 2014 Gay Pride March. Rather than compete for public space, the Occupy activists fully supported the pride parade, and yellow and rainbow umbrellas mingled during the march. Evans Chan notes in an interview: “Strikingly, Hong Kong democratic activists’ coalition-building has turned the idea of “umbrella” into the literal symbol of inclusiveness.”[44] In the film, student leader Alex Chow speaks to a common aspiration for self-determination and the need to “combat arrogance and prejudice.”



Chan includes the Gay Pride Parade in his documentary as one of the high points of the Occupy demonstrations. The coalition politics that emerged during the protests points to the “success” of a movement that did not achieve its immediate demands for electoral reform.



Alex Chow takes the platform in support of LGBTQ rights during the demonstrations

Later in the film, Chow proclaims the importance of solidarity by quoting from Albert Camus’ existentialist manifesto *The Rebel* (1951):

“In absurd situations, pain belongs to the individual. But in rebellion, pain becomes collective shouldered by all. Rebellion brings one out of loneliness. We rebel, therefore we are!”

Although not shown in *Raise the Umbrellas*, the outpouring of support for Alex Chow and the other student leaders took the form of several BL (Boys’ Love) manga that circulated widely on the Internet. Celebrating Alex Chow and Lester Shum, in particular, as “Alexter,” the cartoons queer the protestors and pay tribute to their support for sexual minorities as a cornerstone of a



Example of BL rendering of Alex Chow and Lester Shum circulating on the Internet as "Alexter." Not shown in *Raise the Umbrellas*.

fully functioning democracy. In a fractious local environment in which anti-gay religious sentiment can be toxic, the students' decision to support Hong Kong's LGBTQ community meant that the Umbrella Movement transcended many ideological and cultural differences. The Alexter meme illustrates the way in which the movement pushed the boundaries of democracy to highlight the importance of sexual citizenship in the territory.

## Sexual and flexible citizenship

Addressing viewers in English, Cantonese, and Mandarin, *Raise the Umbrellas* underscores the fact that entreaties for suffrage and full citizenship transcend the borders of the territories in which those demands are made. Many voters in Hong Kong, for example, hold multiple passports, travel extensively, and have expectations for political participation that date back to the colonial period, the promises of the 1984 Joint Accord, and the drafting of the Basic Law, based on multilateral understandings of democracy guaranteed ultimately by the United Nations.

Filmmaker Evans Chan resides in New York, and Vivian Yip, featured in the documentary, has family ties to Indonesia. What Aihwa Ong has termed "flexible citizens"[45] make up a significant portion of the HKSAR population, and their experience of living in diaspora colors the territory's political landscape. Chan's transnational authorial perspective as a resident of both New York and Hong Kong mirrors the experiences of the key figures in the Umbrella Movement, who see beyond national borders and come with concrete experiences of governance in the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Continental Europe, or elsewhere. Exposed to transnational feminism in which "sisterhood is global"[46] and to LGBTQ diasporic connections that may bring sexual minorities into contact with people from other parts of the world within what has been called the "queerscape,"[47] Hong Kong's sexual citizens are indubitably flexible citizens as well.

Global connections for feminists as well as for LGBTQ activists provide transnational support networks that add strength to their participation in democratic reform initiatives such as the Umbrella Movement. Feminist theorists Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan talk about "scattered hegemonies" as a potential oppositional cross-border feminist force as follows:

"For postmodern articulations of difference and global connections can be used to reify dominant social relations, or they can be used to oppose the hegemony of Western imperial culture." [48]

Transnational, feminist, queer connections offer one way of framing the story of the Umbrella Movement pictured in *Raise the Umbrellas*. While the diversity of the movement as well as its opposition plays a role in the film, highlighting women, sexual minorities, and the strength of their transnational ties to similar movements for political inclusion redresses a reluctance to see the Umbrella Movement as part of a wider call for sexual rights.

In fact, one of the consequences of the Umbrella Movement has been a greater awareness of this intersectional inclusivity in Hong Kong, which is particularly notable among the territory's youth. These cultural gains promote optimism. Unfortunately, political and judicial persecution of the demonstrators, who have been removed from elected office, thrown in jail,



The "cruel optimism" of the movement expressed in *Raise the Umbrellas* through its...



...impact on a younger generation of citizens.

and harassed in various ways, can only elicit feelings of extreme pessimism. Lauren Berlant's notion of "cruel optimism" perhaps speaks most eloquently to the situation in Hong Kong in the wake of the 2014 demonstrations:

"Is the best one can hope for *realistically* a stubborn collective refusal to give out, wear out, or admit defeat? In that case, optimism might not be cruel at all, but the bare minimum evidence of not having given up on social change as such." [49]

In spite of the cruelty of Hong Kong's current political situation, sexual citizens such as Anthony Wong, Denise Ho, and the others featured in *Raise the Umbrellas* still have reason to hope for a more inclusive, democratic future.

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## Notes

### Dedication

I dedicate this essay to three men who had an enormous impact on filmmaker Evans Chan's life and career. They all sadly passed away in 2017-18: Arif Dirlik (1940-2017), historian of modern China interviewed in this film; Chuck Kleinhans (1942-2017), Chan's teacher during his doctoral studies at Northwestern University; and Chan's life partner, award-winning author, and associate producer of *Raise the Umbrellas*, Russell Freedman (1929-2018).

1. Jeffrey Weeks. "The Sexual Citizen." *Theory, Culture & Society* 15, no. 3-4 (1998): 35-52. [[return to page 1](#)]
2. For two outstanding examples, see Sebastian Veg. "Creating a Textual Public space. Slogans and Texts from Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement," *Journal of Asian Studies* 75, no. 3 (2016): 673-702. Wendy Gan. "Puckish protesting in the Umbrella Movement," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no.2 (2017):162-176.
3. Macau is the only other territory operating as an SAR of the PRC. However, given differences in size, population, and colonial history, comparisons to Hong Kong's status are limited.
4. "Jasper Tsang tells of police brutality during 1967 riots." *ejinsight*, 9 Feb. 2015, <http://www.ejinsight.com/20150209-jasper-tsang-tells-of-police-brutality-during-1967-riots/>.
5. See interview with Chan and Dan Tsang in Jump Cut issue 58, [Daniel C. Tsang. "Umbrella as symbol of inclusiveness." *Jump Cut* 58, Spring 2018. <http://www.ejumpcut.org/currentissue/TsangEvansChan/index.html>.]
6. Jeffrey Weeks, "The Sexual Citizen", p. 39.
7. See Kimberlé Crenshaw. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43, no.6 (1991 spring): 1241-1299.
8. Lan Dong and Tena L. Helton, "From Beijing Story to their story: Adaptation, politics and gay romance in Stanley Kwan's *Lan Yu*." *Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance* 7, no. 2 (July 2014): 139-153.
9. Heather McKee Hurwitz. *The 51% : Gender, Feminism, and Culture in the Occupy Wall Street Movement*. Dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara. 2015. Megan Boler and Christina Nitsou. "Women Activists of Occupy Wall Street: Consciousness-Raising and Connective Action in Hybrid Social Movements." *Cyberactivism on the Participatory Web*, edited by Martha McCaughey, New York: Routledge, 2014, 232-256.
10. Diane Richardson, "Rethinking Sexual Citizenship." *Sociology* 51, no. 2 (2015): 208-224.
11. As 2018 marks the anniversary of the 1968 protests in many parts of the world, the chant reverberates across the decades. See Haskell Wexler's

*Medium Cool* (1969) for a sense of this.

12. Benjamin Haas. "Taiwan's top court rules in favour of same-sex marriage." *The Guardian*, 24 May 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/24/taiwans-top-court-rules-in-favour-of-same-sex-marriage>.

13. Kenneth Tan. "Only 10 of the 204 members on new Communist Party Central Committee are women." *shanghaiist*, 5 May 2018, <http://shanghaiist.com/2017/10/25/communist-party-central-committee-representation.php>.

14. Tiantian Zheng. *Tongzhi Living: Men Attracted to Men in Postsocialist China*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

15. Petrus Liu. *Queer Marxism in Two Chinas*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015.

16. Ibid., p. 61. Italics in the original.

17. Dapiran, *City of Protest: A Recent History of Dissent in Hong Kong*, p. 86. [[return to page 2](#)]

18. Ibid., p. 94

19. The 2003 demonstrations against the anti-subversion law, Article 23, and the 2012 Scholarism demonstrations opposing the implementation of a national civics curriculum in Hong Kong's schools are two recent examples of the success of street protests in the territory.

20. For a comprehensive account of feminism in post-1997 Hong Kong, see Adelyn Lim. *Transnational Feminism and Women's Movements in Post-1997 Hong Kong: Solidarity Beyond the State*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2015.

21. Elsie Tu, "Pursuit of Western democracy will lead Hong Kong back to colonial bondage." *South China Morning Post*, 9 December 2015, <http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1331525/pursuit-western-democracy-will-lead-hong-kong-back-colonial>.

22. Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, p. 61.

23. "Hong Kong turns down gay marriage." *The New York Times*, 16 April, 2006. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/16/world/asia/16iht-gay.html>.

24. Rachel Blundy, "Hong Kong ignoring 1.5 million marginalised women and funding for women's rights, campaigners say." *South China Morning Post*, 17 June 2017. <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/education-community/article/2098717/hong-kong-ignoring-15-million-marginalised-women>. See also, Eliza W.Y. Lee, "Prospects for the Development of a Critical Feminist Discourse." *Gender and Change in Hong Kong: Globalization, Postcolonialism, and Chinese Patriarchy*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2003, pp 205.

25. Wang Zheng, "Detention of the Feminist Five in China." *Feminist Studies* 41, no. 2 (2015): 476–482.

26. For a history of women's suffrage in the Chinese-speaking world, see Louise Edwards. *Gender, Politics, and Democracy: Women's Suffrage in China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008.

27. Krystie Lee Yandoli, "People Are Upset About Meryl Streep's 'I'd Rather Be a Rebel Than a Slave' T-Shirt." *BuzzFeed*, 6 October, 2015. [https://www.buzzfeed.com/krystieyandoli/people-are-upset-about-meryl-streeps-id-rather-be-a-rebel-th?utm\\_term=.olZzLV7Vv#.xyy7OAYAb](https://www.buzzfeed.com/krystieyandoli/people-are-upset-about-meryl-streeps-id-rather-be-a-rebel-th?utm_term=.olZzLV7Vv#.xyy7OAYAb).

28. For a moving account of Rustin's life, see *Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin* (2003), directed by Nancy Kates and Bennett Singer.

29. Internet reaction to Common's reference to Hong Kong split along partisan lines with a strong Hong Kong versus the PRC undercurrent. See, David Wertime, "From China, Love and Hate for Common's Oscar Speech." *Foreign Policy*, 23 Feb, 2015.  
<https://splinternews.com/oscars-patricia-arquette-follows-call-for-wage-equalit-1793845529>

It is also worth noting that Hong Kong and women's political participation came up indirectly in two other ways during the Academy Awards ceremony that night. First, Laura Poitras won the award for best documentary for *Citizenfour* (2014) that features whistleblower Edward Snowden holed up in a hotel room in Hong Kong while searching for political asylum. Poitras herself, as shown in the film, feared for her own safety as she exercised her free speech rights to cover the story. In addition to Common and Poitras, Patricia Arquette called out unequal pay in the industry during her acceptance speech for Best Supporting Actress in *Boyhood* (2014). Although her clumsy articulation of the issue alienated many, her direct confrontation of sexism in the industry resonates with #MeToo movement and ongoing campaigns to address sexual violence, harassment, and other types of discrimination in the industry. Arielle Castillo characterizes Arquette's problem as follows:

"The problem is that demanding "gay people" and "people of color" who whites have "fought for" to in turn fight for wage equality insinuates that the battles for gay rights and for equality for people of color are over now. They're not. Those struggles continue on a daily basis. In addition, Arquette's awkward framing sets up a distinction between "people of color" and "us"—which makes it seem like she's talking about straight, white women needing the support of other oppressed groups. Many LGBT people and people of color are, in fact, women too. Arquette's language excludes them from the larger conversation, asking groups to fight for her subgroup, rather than with everyone as a whole." (<http://www.american-buddha.com/rapeutation.feministattackarquette.htm>)

30. Kevin Dharmawan, "Jimmy Lai named in TIME's '100 Most Influential People'." *Coconuts*. 17 April, 2015.  
<http://hongkong.coconuts.co/2015/04/17/jimmy-lai-named-times-100-most-influential-people>.

31. For more on this film, see my book, *From Tian'anmen to Times Square: Transnational China and the Chinese Diaspora on Global Screens, 1989-1997*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006.

32. For a comprehensive assessment of Evans Chan's career to date, see Tony Williams, *Postcolonialism, Diaspora, and Alternative Histories: The Cinema of Evans Chan*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2015.

33. See my chapter, "Brecht in Hong Kong: Evans Chan's *The Life and Times of Wu Zhong Xian*." *Postcolonialism, Diaspora, and Alternative Histories: The Cinema of Evans Chan*, edited by Tony Williams. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2015, 81–99.

34. Dapiran, 92.

35. Gloria Chan, "Raise the Umbrella: Occupy anthem may become Hong Kong's song of the year." *South China Morning Post*. 31 December, 2014.  
<http://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/arts-culture/article/1670491/umbrella-movement-anthem-may-become-hong-kongs-song-year>



36. Not to be confused with Christian minister Nora Lam, the subject of *China Cry* (1990). See Jing Yang, "Redeeming the woman from Maoist China in *China Cry: A True Story*," *Jump Cut*, no. 53 (Summer 2011).  
<https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc53.2011/JinYangChinaCry/index.html>.  
[return to page 3]
37. Available on YouTube with English subtitles: "Do you hear the women sing?" *Youtube*, uploaded by HKCC Gender Justice Ministry, 26 November 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ENH43yWYFnI>.
38. "Hong Kong: Women and girls attacked as police fail to protect peaceful protesters." *Amnesty*. 3 October, 2014.  
<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/hong-kong-women-and-girls-attacked-police-fail-protect-peaceful-protesters-2014-10-04>.
39. Lily Kuo and Heather Timmons. "The Umbrella Movement Marks a Coming of Age for Hong Kong's 'Princess' Generation." *Quartz*. 14 November, 2014. <https://qz.com/285345/the-umbrella-movement-marks-a-coming-of-age-for-hong-kongs-princess-generation/>.
40. Emily Tsang. "Student leader Agnes Chow steps back from Occupy spotlight citing 'exhaustion'." *South China Morning Post*. 12 October, 2014. <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1614772/student-leader-agnes-chow-steps-back-spotlight-citing-exhaustion>.
41. Kris Cheng. "Hong Kong gov't bans legislative election hopeful Agnes Chow from running as she 'advocated self-determination'." *Hong Kong Free Press*. 27 January, 2018.  
<https://www.hongkongfp.com/2018/01/27/breaking-hong-kong-govt-bans-legislative-election-hopeful-running-advocated-self-determination/>.
42. Although her memory of Orwell's exact words may not be precise, Lau has related this anecdote in other interviews as well. See, Joyce Lim, "Hong Kong a city of uncertainties after the handover." *The Straits Times*. 11 June, 2017.  
<http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/a-city-of-uncertainties-after-the-handover>
43. Stephanie Rogers. "What Occupy Wall Street Owes to Feminist Consciousness-Raising." *Ms. Magazine*. 13 December, 2011.  
<http://msmagazine.com/blog/2011/12/13/what-occupy-wall-street-owes-to-feminist-consciousness-raising/>. Emphasis in the original.
44. Daniel C. Tsang. "Umbrella as symbol of inclusiveness." *Jump Cut* 58, Spring 2018.  
<http://www.ejumpcut.org/currentissue/TsangEvansChan/index.html>
45. Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999.
46. See, for example, SIGI, <https://sigi.org/>, founded by Robin Morgan.
47. Helen Hok-sze Leung. "Queerscapes in Contemporary Hong Kong Cinema." *positions: east asia cultures critique* 9, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 423–447.
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Queens fight against violence, harassment and discrimination. (*Screaming Queens*)



Trans\* pioneer Stormé DeLarverie is the subject of one of the earliest documentaries discussed here. (Photo: Diane Arbus.) (*Stormé: Lady of the Jewel Box*)



Candy Darling and Jackie Curtis appear in a publicity still for Paul Morrissey's *Flesh* (1968).

## Transgender documentary subjects shaping "hirstory"

by [Chris Holmlund](#)

This essay evaluates documentaries about trans\* leaders in the fight for visibility, equality and justice in the United States during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. A few are still alive and still activists. No one of these leaders identified as "trans\*" or "transgender" at the time—the term has only been widely used and given an expansive meaning since the early 1990s.[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] "Shaping" here refers to the diverse forms that documentaries take—essay films, avant-garde work, archival compilations, portraits of individuals or groups, interactive interviews, witness and expert testimony and so on. "Shaping" also implicates embodiment through voicing, apparel, gesture, musculature, wigs, hair, hormones and surgery.[2] "Hirstory" draws on one of several transgender pronouns in current usage[3] to pun on "history." I want to honor trans\* and queer agency and to question the idea that history is objective, authorless, unchanging or perennially "true": these documentary subjects relate and contextualize their own stories, their own histories.

All these ten short and feature-length documentaries figure and mold embodiment and craft "hirstory" through what they say and don't say, show and don't show, "organizing perceptions and prescribing actions" (Väliaho 2010, 11). Most foreground their subjects' experiences and expertise. We also see people "making conscious, informed choices about the best way to live their own embodied lives" (Stryker and Bettcher 2016, 7). Each film catalogues the violence, harassment and discrimination directed at and fought against by gender variant people. Most of the films emphasize the multiple ways that class, race and age impact lives and inflect categories like "gender" and "sexuality." Several recognize that how their subjects have described themselves and been described—and treated—has changed. All rewrite or avoid the transphobic tropes dear to earlier mainstream films. There "'reality' [was] sutured to the privileging of sight" (Snorton 2017, 140) in three principal ways: 1) "genital reveals" positioned trans\* women (in particular) as "deceptive" or "pathetic," predators or victims, 2) "before" and "after" photographs made a binary gender system seem "natural" and bodily variations or modifications "artificial," and 3) physical transformations were sensationalized.

The documentaries I analyze were made beginning in 1987 over a 30-year period. One is not yet finished. Some have aired on television, others have enjoyed theatrical release. Most have screened at festivals and are currently in U.S. distribution. Several can be found on the Internet, though availability especially on YouTube comes and goes.[5] I provide brief information about production and distribution with each of the films I analyze because how a film is made, for whom, when, affects how its story or stories are told. I have no data on reception.

The essay is divided into three sections:

- A first section, "Debuting on the stage of American political history,"[6] discusses how key events in trans\* history have been presented, looking at

(*Beautiful Darling*).



*The Pursuit: 50 Years in the Fight for LGBT Rights* remembers Elizabeth Coffey's star turn in John Water's *Pink Flamingos* (1972).



Documentaries that focus on activism and events often include demonstrations, marches and parades. (*Major!*)



Both *Screaming Queens* and *Stonewall Uprising* include clips from the recently restored 1967 short, *Queens at Heart*.

Victor Silverman and Susan Stryker's 2005 *Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton's Cafeteria* and Kate Davis and David Heilbroner's 2010 *Stonewall Uprising*.

- A second section, "Playing the part of being themselves," surveys four films about gender variant entertainers: James Rasin's 2010 *Beautiful Darling* (about Candy Darling), Craig Highberger's 2004 *Superstar in a Housedress* (about Jackie Curtis), Silas Howard's 2015 *Sticks & Stones; Bambi Lake* (about Bambi Lake) and Michelle Parkerson's 1987 *Stormé: The Lady of the Jewel Box* (about Stormé DeLarverie).
- A third section, "It's not what I did, it's what I do now," compares three documentaries about activists: Alisa Lebow's 1994 *OUTLAW* (featuring author Leslie Feinberg), Ilana Trachtman's 2016 *The Pursuit: 50 Years in the Fight for LGBT Rights* (the last segment focuses on actress Elizabeth Coffey Williams – billed as Elizabeth Coffey in Waters' films) and Annalise Ophelian's 2015 *Major!* (about prison activist and Stonewall participant Miss Major Griffin-Gracy).

My examinations move from documentaries about catalytic incidents, to individual "hirstories" of showpeople, to broader commentary about communities. The last group of films is primarily concerned with the present. The first two groups are memory projects. In conclusion I reference films about early trans\* leaders that have recently been made, and name trans\* activist elders about whom documentaries have yet to be made. I end by talking about Susan Stryker's documentary-in-progress *Christine in the Cutting Room*. An off-screen narrator voicing Christine Jorgensen says,

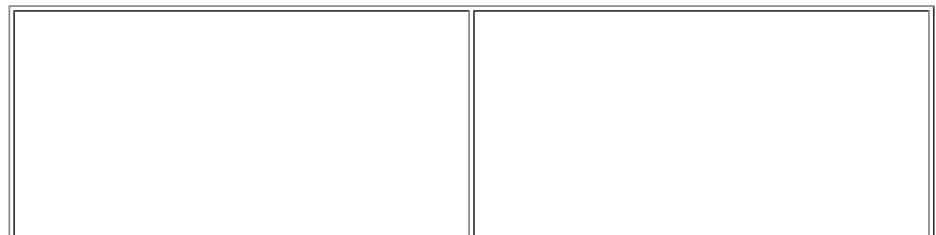
"Movies were my life.... Cinema made the body plastic.... It taught me how to be what I became." [7]

Through commentary and visual montage, Stryker considers post World War II identities and politics from wider perspectives than most of the other documentaries. She plans to foreground the connections between embodiment and editing in order to evoke ethics, enlist emotions and allude to experience.

Taken together, juxtaposed and compared, these documentaries foreground how complicated visibility is as a tool of political power. Nicole Morse is right to argue that "the tools and methods through which visibility is negotiated matter" (2016, 12). All these films offer pieces of transgender history, of transgender "hirstory." All refuse a universalizing, "one size fits all," explanatory "master" "his-story." It is up to us to make sense of what we see and hear, and up to *us*, in turn, to act.

## "Debuting on the stage of American political history"

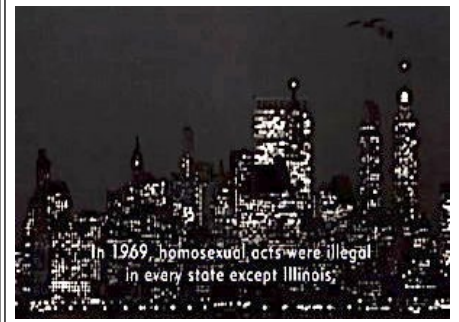
Both *Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton Cafeteria* and *Stonewall Uprising* recount events in trans\* history using talking head interviews, photographs, newspaper articles, recreations and snippets from "educational" films and television shows. Some of the older film and TV footage they incorporate was intended to inspire fear.[8] Other early footage showcases transsexuals, homosexuals and lesbians (to use their terminology) who are determined and self-confident.[9] Both include testimony from transgender women. In neither case could the filmmakers draw on film coverage of the original riots. There are not many photographs of the incidents either. Both documentaries are thus what Stryker calls "recovery history" projects (2013).







One of the few extant photos of protesters at the Stonewall riots is used repeatedly in *Stonewall Uprising*.



Explanatory texts accompany voice-over narration and testimony in *Stonewall Uprising*.

San Francisco's 1966 Compton Cafeteria riot was largely unknown until Stryker's 2005 film. New York's Stonewall riots, in contrast, have long been seen as the beginning of gay militancy *and* hailed as initiating the transgender rights movement. Heilbroner and Davis' 2010 film, however, frames Stonewall as a gay and lesbian uprising.[10] They and Silverman and Stryker are all at pains to explain why the revolts they chronicle happened. Participants, witnesses and experts talk about violence directed against those who look different, laws making homosexuality and cross-dressing illegal, police persecution, rampant job discrimination and psychiatric and medical "treatments" administered to anyone with "deviant" desires and/or presentation.[11] In one of the more powerful sequences in *Stonewall Uprising* interviewees describe the shock treatments, lobotomies, and drugs that were administered to gay people to erase same-sex desire. One of the drugs was the pharmaceutical equivalent of waterboarding, one felt as if one were drowning. "You could be taken to jail at any time, at any second, for no reason at all," says Suzan Cooke in *Screaming Queens*, or for having long hair or wearing lipstick, mascara or a blouse with buttons on the "wrong" side, adds Amanda St. Jaymes.

San Francisco's trans\* community and New York's trans\* and gay community viewed the cafeteria and the bar, respectively, as relatively safe spaces. They bonded there and in the streets. "We became each other's family," St. Jaymes explains. When police raided the bar and cafeteria yet again in 1966 and 1969, respectively, trans\* and gay people finally fought back.

In both films the selection and placement of the interviews and the positioning of the accompanying archival material operate according to broadcast documentary conventions, guiding viewers toward a pre-determined meaning (Rughani 2013, 99). In *Screaming Queens* the chosen meaning, Stryker-as-narrator says, is the transgender movement's "debut on the stage of American political history." [12] The interviewees who took part in the Compton's Cafeteria riot concur. They refer to themselves as "queens," "female impersonators," "gutter girls," "transsexuals" and "transvestites." In conclusion they describe transitioning to be the women they always knew they were. Proto-lesbian and -gay organizations like the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society provided support, as did San Francisco's radical- and church-affiliated Vanguard group. Police sergeant Elliot Blackstone even became an advocate for trans\* concerns, and was instrumental in getting the laws against cross-dressing changed.

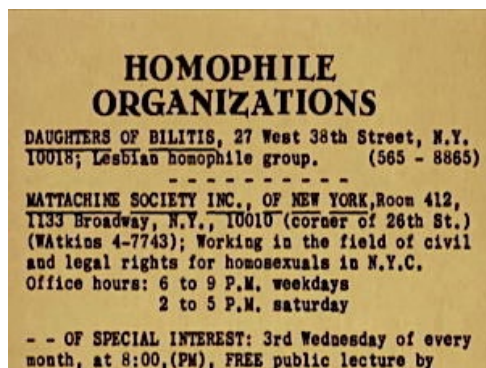
Based on a book by David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution*, *Stonewall Uprising* emphasizes gay and lesbian concerns even though Carter acknowledges in passing, that there was lots of "gender transgression" at the bar (2010, 153).[13] The Daughters of Bilitis and Mattachine Society are again cited as paving the way, here for a lesbian and gay movement. Some interviewees refer to themselves as "drag queens," "nelly queens," "sissies," "faggots" or "queers." Jerry Hoose, who describes himself as a street kid with



In San Francisco trans\* women became each other's family. (*Screaming Queens*)



Trans\* women and queer would gather at Compton's Cafeteria at night. (*Screaming Queens*)



Both *Screaming Queens* and *Stonewall Uprising* recognize earlier organizations like the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society. (*Stonewall Uprising*)

nothing to lose in 1969, tells about the song that he and others sang to taunt police:

"We are the Stonewall girls./We wear our hair in curls./We wear no underwear./We show our pubic hair.../We wear our dungarees/Above our nelly knees."

Throughout, however, Heilbroner and Davis sidestep the "T" in what has become an LGBTQ+ movement.[14] The words "transsexual" and "transvestite" are never uttered, and captions identify no one as "transgender" though one participant, Yvonne Ritter, is shown wearing a dress, lipstick and jewelry.[15] Heilbroner's script adopts the single focus common in many made-for-TV documentaries rather than mention, as Carter does, that transsexual street queens of color sparked the riots and butch lesbians also played a crucial part (2010, 153).



*Stonewall Uprising* does not identify Yvonne Ritter as trans\*, though she is.



Raymond Castro, here shown when younger, is the only non-white gay man interviewed in *Stonewall Uprising*.



Bay area activist Felicia Elizondo (also seen in *Major!*) confronted job and housing discrimination in the 1960s because she cross-dressed and is trans\*. (*Screaming Queens*)

Only a few photos and bits of archival footage show queens of color, and all of the talking heads save one, Raymond Castro, are Anglo and white.[16] Such silencing and whitening occurs all too frequently in mainstream gay activism that has argued, from the 1970s on, for the validity of homosexuals as "manly men." To be accepted, so the logic goes, men, whether gay, trans\* or straight, must be masculine, and masculinity must seem natural, dominant and sincere. Femininity is accordingly—inherently—conceived of as "contrived," "frivolous" and "manipulative" (Serano 2007, 43). Trans\*, lesbian and gay people of color disappear into a "shadow history" (Snorton 2017, 143).

*Screaming Queens'* openly trans\* witnesses are more racially and ethnically diverse. We hear, for example, from Felicia Elizondo and Tamara Ching, and they say their experiences were not the same as those of white entertainers like Aleshia Brevard. Elizondo and Ching walked the streets because they could not find other work; Brevard performed on stage. Clearly the "contours of racial or class experiences ... shape and reshape what gender or sexuality themselves can mean" (Valentine 2007, 18).

Both films thus delimit "stage" and define "debut." Each shapes embodiment using participant testimony and occasional "experts." Although we see some photographs of interviewees when they were younger, neither film includes before and after photographs or salacious/threatening/ comic—take your mainstream film genre pick—"reveals." Made with funds from a variety of LGBT-friendly foundations, distributed by Frameline and shown on public TV, *Screaming Queens'* co-director/co-screenwriter Stryker is present throughout *Screaming Queens*. She begins by describing how momentous the discovery of the Compton riot was to her: she had just finished her Ph.D., come out as transsexual and

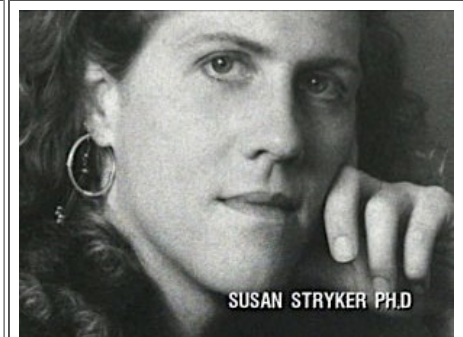


White entertainers like Aleshia Brevard did not have to walk the streets. They could make a living on stage. (*Screaming Queens*).

started to transition from male to female. "I felt really hungry for a community," she says as she looks at files in the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Historical Society. She is the only filmmaker to identify as trans\* on camera in the documentaries I discuss. Her co-director, Victor Silverman, is not seen, heard from or identified.[17] Made for public television's American Experience series, *Stonewall Uprising*'s directors are invisible and inaudible.[18] Their "voice" emerges only through their script and editing. The kind of expository and interactive documentary they practice derives power from the witnesses who speak, yet it constructs and restricts the tales that are told—here to the detriment of trans\* and non-white voices.[19]



*Stonewall Uprising* concentrates solely on the birth of the lesbian and gay movement.



Co-director, author, trans\* activist and academic Susan Stryker is seen throughout *Screaming Queens*. She tells us why San Francisco's earlier trans\* leaders are so important to her and to "hirstory."

## "Playing the part of being themselves"



San Francisco's Cockettes were among the most gender-bending 1960s and 1970s performance groups. (*Sticks & Stones*; *Bambi Lake*)

Candy Darling, Jackie Curtis, Bambi Lake and Stormé DeLarverie all made history as entertainers. Three (Darling, Curtis and DeLarverie) worked in New York. Darling and Curtis were part of Andy Warhol's Factory in the 1960s and 1970s. Older than the others, DeLarverie emceed for the Jewel Box Revue in the 1950s and 1960s, then worked as a bodyguard and bouncer at lesbian clubs. Younger, Lake performed with the Cockettes and in punk clubs and cabarets in the 1970s and 1980s, usually in San Francisco. All used drag to make a living and to be themselves. For each of them drag served as a means of expression and as a manifestation of embodiment.

James Rasin's 2010 *Beautiful Darling* and Craig Highberger's 2004 *Superstar in a Housedress* are documentary features. Both were independently produced and participate in the current fascination with Andy Warhol's Factory.[20] Both received theatrical release. Both Silas Howard's 2015 *Sticks & Stones*; *Bambi Lake* and Michelle Parkerson's 1987 *Stormé: The Lady of the Jewel Box* are shorts. They have primarily screened in festivals. *Sticks & Stones* was finished thanks to completion funding from LGBTQ distributor Frameline. The earliest of all the documentaries studied here, made before the rise of trans\* movements in the early 1990s, *Stormé* was funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the D.C. Commission on the Arts & Humanities, Gay Education Fund (Washington, DC), Women's Project—The Film Fund and Film News Now Foundation.[21]

Candy Darling and Jackie Curtis were both dead when the documentaries about them were made—Darling in 1974, age 29, of lymphoma; Curtis in 1985, age 38, of a heroin overdose. As a result both films rely on archival footage and reminiscences. Focus is on them as stars. Some historical context is provided. We hear from people who, like Darling and Curtis, participated in the 1960s and





Candy Darling and Lou Reed are two good reasons why audiences are fascinated by the 1960s and 1970s New York City downtown scenes. (*Beautiful Darling*)

1970s downtown New York performance scenes: writer/actor Taylor Mead, actress Penny Arcade, Warhol Superstar Holly Woodlawn, actor Agosto Machado, performer Paul Ambrose and director Paul Morrissey.



Jackie Curtis's *Heaven Grand in Amber Orbit* was a low-budget hit at LaMaMa in 1976. (*Superstar in a Housedress*)



Sister Superstar Holly Woodlawn is interviewed in *Superstar* as well as, here, in *Beautiful Darling*.



The beautiful young Jeremiah Newton and Candy Darling make the scene. (*Superstar*)

*Beautiful Darling* adds the voices of other notables, among them filmmaker, artist and author John Waters, producer and actress Julie Newman, and author and occasional actress Fran Lebowitz. Younger, Chloë Sevigny becomes the "voice" of Candy Darling, reading from Darling's diaries. Lily Tomlin narrates *Superstar*. Critic Michael Musto, Superstar Joe Dallesandro, actor Harvey Fierstein, and playwright/theater director John Vaccaro also speak. Candy Darling's longtime friend, Jeremiah Newton, who helped produce *Beautiful Darling*, is seen in photographs as a young boy and in present day footage as a much heavier and older man. He conducted audio interviews with Darling's friends and family after her death and these are included, too. His preparations for the burial of Darling's ashes provide the film's through-line. He is as close to an "author" as this film gets. Rasin is neither seen nor heard, nor is Highberger.[22]

Both of the *Superstar* documentaries look back on earlier decades with affection, remembering parties, friends and lovers, though mentioning tough times, too. Candy Darling's father was homo- and trans\*phobic and abusive, *Beautiful Darling* informs us. She and Curtis risked being arrested because female impersonation was illegal. *Interview* editor Bob Colacello tells us that Darling knew she was different already at age five. (At birth she had been named James L. Slattery.) We see "before" photographs of a long-legged adolescent and a younger boy but they are not introduced to say the "real" Candy Darling was male. We also see photographs of Curtis (born John Holder) as a boy and young man. He performed and lived throughout his adult life both as a woman and as a man.



Friends describe Curtis as a shy, lonely boy. (*Superstar*)



As an adult Curtis lived and performed as both a woman and a man. (*Superstar*)



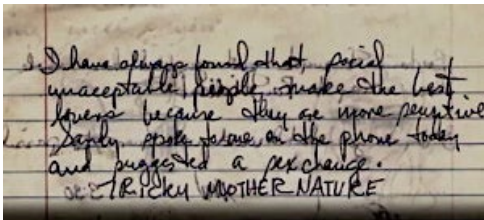
Candy Darling knew she was different already at age five. (*Beautiful Darling*)


Some diary entries detail Darling's regrets:

"I am living this strange stylized sexuality.... I try to explain my identity as being a male who has assumed the attitudes and somewhat the emotions of a female. I don't know which role to play.... I can't go swimming, can't visit relatives, can't get a job, can't have a boyfriend. I see so much of life I cannot have."

No attempt is made to straitjacket her words into medical terminology such as "gender dysphoria." [23] Some interviewees describe Jackie Curtis fondly as "insane" thanks to constant ingestion of drug cocktails. Harvey Fierstein says:

"We need to take care of our insane. They are the Christopher Columboes of the mind."



Mother Nature can be tricky, writes Candy Darling in her diary. (*Beautiful Darling*)

Movies fueled Darling's desires and influenced her embodiment. In archival footage she speaks in breathy imitation of her idol, Kim Novak. Darling took hormones to enhance her femininity but never had a sex change. In her diary she declares herself "not interested in genuineness. I'm interested in the product of being a woman and how qualified I am." On her deathbed, dressed in her finest, she is clear that

"You must always be yourself. No matter what the price. That is the highest form of morality."



Candy Darling idolized and imitated Kim Novak, here seen with William Holden in *Picnic* (Joshua Logan, 1956). (*Beautiful Darling*)

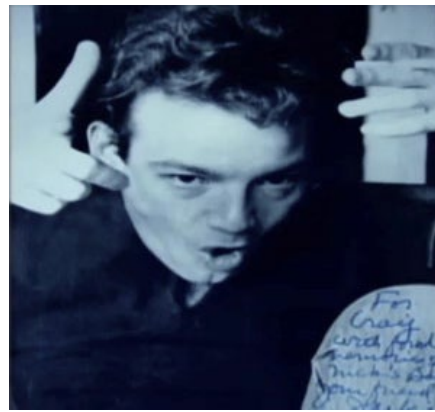
Most interviewees refer to Candy as "she." Warhol liked that Candy was "a person playing the part of being themselves.... Real but ... not real," explains Vincent Fremont, head of the Warhol Foundation. Although she also talks about the violence that Darling and other cross-dressers confronted, Fran Lebowitz protests:

"A man who wants to be a woman [should] keep [his] winning hand.... A woman has to be a little girl. Candy was a fantasy."

Trans\* singer Jayne County corrects her:

"That is like someone slapping you in the face. You have to accept a transgender person's perception of what they are or you are disrespecting their gender." [24]

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Jackie Curtis lived as 'James Dean' for a year. (*Superstar*)



Curtis's final persona was 'Shannon Montgomery.' (*Superstar*)



Superstar Jackie Curtis 'speaks' in an opening text. (*Superstar*)



Jackie Curtis simultaneously comes on to and chides Mr. America in *Women in Revolt* (Paul Morrissey, 1971). (*Superstar*)



Jackie Curtis declaims his alliterative poem, "B-Girls." (*Superstar*)

Jackie Curtis was more "gender queer," writing plays and poetry, performing sometimes as a woman, sometimes as a man. Curtis lived in James Dean "male drag" for a year and as Shannon Montgomery in the final months before death. Stars like Maria Montez, Bette Davis, Joan Crawford and Barbara Stanwyck provided inspiration but were not models to be copied. Musto admits that Curtis liked playing large diva roles but was a movie star in a housedress—or an ingenue in torn up, pinned together gowns. Some interviewees talk about "he," others use "she." A text at the start of the film contradicts everyone:

"I am not a boy, not a girl, not gay, not straight, not a drag queen, not a transsexual. I am Jackie."

A quote from Warhol follows:

"Jackie Curtis is ... a pioneer without a frontier."

Broad-shouldered, athletic, using plenty of drugs but never hormones, Curtis gave performances of femininity that were not imitations.[25] Morrissey says,

"There was nothing feminine about Jackie. He made no attempt."

And according to Tomlin, he

"lived his life as a kind of performance art. Everybody would get very



sexually disoriented—you just weren't sure how you wanted to relate."

Curtis wanted to be known as a writer, but performing in drag brought more fame.

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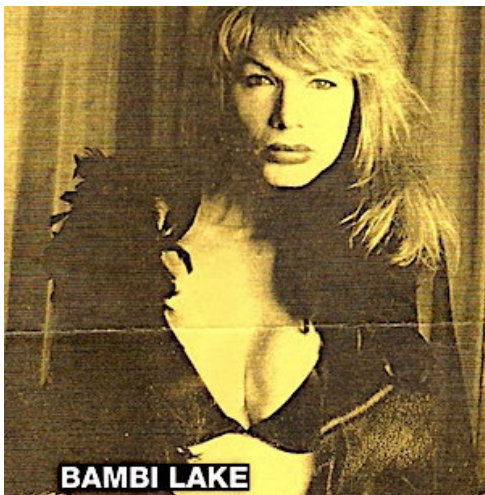
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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Director Silas Howard talks with Bambi Lake and Birdie Bob-Watts. (*Sticks & Stones*)



The young Bambi Lake in a publicity shot. (*Sticks*)



Bambi Lake on stage. (*Sticks*)

*Sticks & Stones* and *Stormé* include less archival material than *Screaming Queens*, *Stonewall Uprising* or the documentaries about the Warhol Superstars do. Briefly we see Howard encourage Bambi Lake's reminiscences in *Sticks & Stones*. Parkerson is obliquely present in *Stormé*.<sup>[26]</sup> [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Lake and DeLarverie speak for themselves. Candy Darling and Curtis speak at a remove in *Beautiful Darling* and *Superstar*, their vibrant personae captured only in earlier stage and screen performances. Because they are dead, for the most part others speak about them or—in Darling's case—for her.

*Sticks & Stones* offers a grittier view of trans\* life than the Superstar documentaries do. Remembering older survivors, Howard insists, is important because AIDS so disrupted queer and trans\* history in the 1980s and 1990s. People were dying in droves in New York City when Curtis overdosed, but *Superstar* does not mention the fact. *Sticks & Stones* begins with footage of San Francisco's Polk Street and the Castro district. Trans\* hustlers like Bambi Lake worked Polk Street in the 1970s. The Castro was more upscale.



Director Silas Howard talks with Bambi Lake and Birdie Bob-Watts. (*Sticks & Stones*)



The Castro district was more upscale and a gay mecca. (*Sticks*)

Images of beautiful young men, many of them probably dead, flash past as Bambi Lake's pianist of twenty years, Birdie Bob-Watt says:

"Those people who still remained ... became ... touchstones to history."

We see reenactments and archival footage of Bob-Watt and Lake's performances and posters of their club dates. Both describe the violence, harassment and discrimination trans\* people face. Lake says that in the 1970s she named herself "Bambi":

"It was like leave me alone, don't hurt me. ... We weren't even talking about being transgender. We were just girls. We were passing."

Photographs and footage show her as glamorous when younger. Older, she looks ravaged, though she rejoices in telling about "hanging out with Iggy and Bowie" in Europe, back in the day when she was part of the international punk scene. Today her life is

"kind of sad and lonely.... I live in a rundown apartment with mice and cockroaches.... I don't eat much."





Bambi Lake today. She doesn't eat much. Her life is rough. (Sticks)



Birdie Bob-Watt, Lake's accompanist for decades, says that, although destitute, she is not allowed in women's shelters. (Sticks)



Stormé DeLarverie began as a female singer. (Stormé)



The family-friendly Jewel Box Revue often played Harlem's famed Apollo Theater. (Stormé)



Joan Nestle, Lesbian Herstory Archives curator,

Even when homeless she is not allowed in women's shelters, Bob-Watt adds. Trans\* women without money have a hard time finding find safe, clean housing. *Screaming Queens*, *Major!* and *The Pursuit* explain that things are especially tough for trans\* people of color.

A good twenty years older than Candy Darling, Jackie Curtis, Bambi Lake, Leslie Feinberg, Elizabeth Coffey Williams or the trans\* leaders interviewed in *Screaming Queens* and *Stonewall Uprising*, Stormé DeLarverie was about to turn 66 when Parkerson filmed her.[27] She describes how in 1948, on a dare, she became a male impersonator. She had been a female singer. She became the emcee of Harlem's Jewel Box Revue. A tailor made her outfits. One of the "nice young men" she worked with enviously comments:

"You didn't have to go through the fittings we did!"

In the late 1960s DeLarverie became a bodyguard and bouncer. She does not mention Stonewall, although she was there. Occasionally she reacts to the presence of Parkerson's camera, when she starts to tear up while describing the death of her close friend, female impersonator Lynne Carter, for example. Carter had been the star of the Jewel Box Revue and was part of Stormé's chosen family. Because she has just said, proudly, that she never cries, she insists that Parkerson stop filming: her tough guy persona is at stake. Speaking in 1987 she is unequivocal when it comes to her gender identity:

"All I had to do was just be me and let people use their imaginations. It never changed me. I was still a woman. ... I never moved any different than I did when I was wearing women's clothes."

She is the "lady" of the film's subtitle because she is principled, compelling, regal. She alludes to her race: "I grew up hard, with my mixed blood" in New Orleans and "paid my dues." [28] Linda Dittmar calls DeLarverie a "butch" but admits that the film "makes it difficult for us to think of its protagonist as ... specifically 'lesbian'" (1997, 80-1). DeLarverie says nothing about her sexuality, just, "It's not easy being green." In a brief interview Lesbian Herstory Archives curator Joan Nestle emphasizes gender:

"For women [to cross-dress] was much more perplexing to society, laughing in some way at, and duplicating, a power that was very privileged. Male impersonators may even be more threatening than female impersonators.... Their invisibility is not an accident."

Julia Serano says much the same thing:

"The media tends to not notice—or to outright ignore—trans men because they are unable to sensationalize them the way they do trans women without bringing masculinity itself into question" (2007, 46).



explains why male impersonators may be more threatening, and more invisible. (*Stormé*)



On a dare, DeLarverie began dressing as a man. (*Stormé*)



Stormé shares a laugh with one of her Jewel Box "first born" "boys," Robin Rogers. (*Stormé*)



Handsome and assured, DeLarverie posed several times for Diane Arbus in the 1960s. (*Stormé*)



After her release from prison, Miss Major became friends with a young black woman, Deborah Brown. Some years later they had a son together, whom Miss Major raised. (*Major!*)

Writing about "male-to-female transsexuals" in the early 1990s, Marge Garber talks about Jan Morris, Renée Richards and Christine Jorgensen, arguing that

"one of the most striking dissymmetries between 'male' and 'female' subjectivities ... is the public's fascination with men who have been surgically transformed to women when they are alive, and with women who have lived their whole lives as men, only after they are *dead*" (1992, 110).

This was certainly true at the time *Stormé* was made. It makes Parkerson's documentary about someone who lived much of her life as a man all the more "historically" valuable. What would DeLarverie call herself today?[29] The numbers of people transitioning in each direction are now roughly the same, but even today there are fewer documentaries, fiction films or TV shows about trans\* men and trans\* men of color are even more rarely seen (Keegan 2014). White is the default, the "norm." The hierarchical values attached to binary gender and racial structures are hard to transcend, hard to trans\*-end.

## "It's not what I did, it's what I do now"

Alisa Lebow's 1994 *OUTLAW*, Ilana Trachtman's 2016 *The Pursuit: 50 Years in the Fight for LGBT Rights* and Annalise Ophelian's 2015 *Major!* are more concerned with present-day activism, though each also touches on the past. All, accordingly, are less nostalgic than the documentaries about entertainers are. Each utilizes archival clips as well as witness testimony. Annalise Ophelian's 2015 *Major!* adds color sketches and animation. Each visually segments their narratives through intertitles that highlight topics. All three talk about violence and discrimination, but the emotional charge of their argumentation differs. All applaud and showcase friends and trans\* and queer families. *Major!* and *The Pursuit* talk poignantly about the impact of aging and indict housing and job discrimination. Only *Major!* describes the isolation, humiliation and rape that trans\* women are subjected to in prison.

*OUTLAW* and *Major!* make "authorship" more collaborative. *OUTLAW*'s introductory titles credit Lebow "with" Leslie Feinberg. (Feinberg was one of the first people to advocate for a transgender movement.)[30] Feinberg's partner, Minnie Bruce Pratt, participated in the film's planning and execution as well. Together the three decided what was to be discussed and where filming was to take place (Lebow, Email to author, January 15, 2018). Lebow makes her "voice" known through playful editing, pithy captions and an off-camera question. She is not seen.[31] In contrast, Trachtman was commissioned by Philadelphia's PBS station, WHYY, to make a film commemorating the 50th anniversary of a 1965 gay rights protest in front of Independence Hall.[32] *The Pursuit* is, like *Stonewall Uprising*, expository and interactive. Trachtman's voice is not heard, nor is she seen. The last segment features 1970s Dreamlander and trans\* actress



Partners Leslie Feinberg and Minnie Bruce Pratt collaborated with Alisa Lebow on *OUTLAW*.



*The Pursuit* includes footage of a recreation of the 1965 demonstration for "homosexual" rights outside Philadelphia's Independence Hall.



Chosen families are the best: Miss Major and two of her daughters. (*Major!*)

Elizabeth Coffey Williams. Older and younger gay and trans\* friends have become her and each other's family. Prison and AIDS activist, Stonewall combatant and Attica prison survivor Miss Major Griffin-Gracy acknowledges how excited she is that she is about to meet "Annalise" at the start of *Miss Major* but does not say that Ophelian is about to direct a film about Miss Major's life-long fight for justice. Ophelian does not appear onscreen.[33] Almost 20 other trans\* community members tell their stories and describe how Miss Major helped them, in prison and out. Some are younger, some older. Many but not all are trans\* women of color. Much as was the case with *OUTLAW*, the guiding principle was "nothing about us without us...." Where Lebow, Feinberg and Pratt conferred about topics and locations, *Major!* shared decisions about editing:

"Miss Major and interview participants ... reviewed the film in the editing stage to ensure that their contributions were represented with accuracy and authenticity" (Missmajorfilm 2016).

The 1994 *OUTLAW* is, with the 1987 *Stormé*, one of the earlier films to be made about an older trans\* leader. Made on a shoe-string for "about \$1,500 out of pocket, most of that for post-production," Lebow's film is also the least expensive of all the trans\* pioneer documentaries I survey. Lebow, Feinberg and Pratt could make decisions without interference or guidelines, though the video's production values are not as high as they might have been.[34] The film screened once on television on New York's local PBS station, WNET, and played a few lesbian, gay and transgender film festivals. *The Pursuit* was shown on WHYY and in various community settings. Funding came from the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage. Broadcast TV time constraints doubtless affected the format: units on queer/trans\* youth, the police department, queer/trans\* families, and queer/trans\* aging are brought together in an hour-long umbrella narrative. Widely shown at trans\*, queer and human rights festivals, the winner of many awards, *Major!* was partially funded through a Kickstarter campaign that brought in \$27,000. The San Francisco Film Society, Horizons Foundation, and various community organizations also helped with the estimated \$113,000 cost. *Major!* became in consequence more a community effort than an institutionally sanctioned enterprise.

*OUTLAW* uses Feinberg, a practiced public speaker, as a teacher. Initially Feinberg describes herself "as a transgendered woman," then says others see her as a man.[35] What pronoun or pronouns would Feinberg choose today? "They" quite likely. In what follows, I use "they," because Feinberg refers both to "woman" and to "man." [36]



Leslie Feinberg performs the "obligatory" trans* tie sequence that is supposed to sensationalize transformation. "The suit does not make the man," reads Lebow's supportive intertitle. (OUTLAW)	Feinberg talks about discrimination on New York City's piers, where countless queer and trans* folks have been killed. (OUTLAW)



Tim Curry as Frank-n-Furter in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* provides delicious queer/trans\* delight. (OUTLAW)

In a section titled "Suit and Tie Optional" set in a men's clothing store, for example, Feinberg says: "It's risky to buy a suit if you're not a traditional man," then that the tie and suit have little to do with being "transgendered." Feinberg rages about the rapes and murders of trans\* individuals on the Hudson piers and rails against police failure to investigate the 1992 death of trans\* activist Marsha P. Johnson. "Until we're organized as a community we're sort of a bigger group of people to bash," they say, remembering how the police publicized Brandon Teena's "female" birth and thereby provoked Teena's murder. From a working class background, they know that people who "lack the protection of class privilege" are especially vulnerable (Straayer 1997, p. 220).[37] In "Relevant Histories," Feinberg insists on the need for ancestors and describe how thrilling it was to learn about the berdache. Lebow's camera pans over a clay diorama of Native American men, women and berdache.

"What if I'd known all that when I was growing up! I could have found my place in history!"

Joan of Arc is another role model. Lebow adds a clip from *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1928).[38] A section titled "Horror Shows" castigates and condemns mainstream movies:

"I don't see myself represented.... The way transgendered people have been portrayed makes it harder to walk the streets."

In support Lebow cuts in footage from *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), *Dressed to Kill* (Brian de Palma, 1980) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991). All are thrillers about trans\* murderers.[39] Angrily Pratt says that passers-by stare at them as if they were animals in a zoo when they are out. Only when gardening or watching the cult hit, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975), do the two share smiles, relax and laugh. Lebow and Feinberg had agreed that film would work well (Lebow, Email to author, January 15, 2018): like Feinberg, Dr. Frank-N-Furter (Tim Curry) is an outlaw.



At home, watching *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, Pratt and Feinberg can relax and be themselves. (OUTLAW)

*The Pursuit* is more optimistic, although the "Kids Today" section features LGBT adolescents who have experienced abuse, discrimination and intolerance from their families and/or while living on the streets.[40] An introduction of sorts glosses historical events: 1965 demonstrations at Philadelphia's City Hall, 1969's Stonewall riots, the 1973 removal of homosexuality from the APA's list of disorders, the mid 1980s AIDS crisis, the 2015 legalization of gay marriage.





*The Pursuit* recalls darker days: the AIDS epidemic.



Prison activist and scholar Angela Davis visits Miss Major. (*Major!*)



Wearing a suit, with a beard and breasts, Miss Major takes care of her little son. (*Major!*)



Philadelphia's John C. Anderson LGBT-friendly apartments offer safe, affordable living to Elizabeth Coffey and her friends. (*The Pursuit*)



Elizabeth Coffey encourages younger trans\* friends in a support group. (*The Pursuit*)

In the final section, "No Place Like Home," we learn that in nursing homes older LGBT people are often forced to go back into the closet. Living in the LGBT-friendly John C. Anderson Apartments, Elizabeth Coffey Williams is a happy exception. She talks about her past.[41] We see images of her as a young girl but never as a boy. When it is her turn to speak in a trans\* support group, she describes the break-up of her marriage as yet another transition, one she didn't plan for. When she was young there were no support groups. "When you get lemons, make lemonade," she says encouragingly. Together with a handful of other interviewees she represents the "T" in "LGBT." [42]

*Major!*, in contrast, zeroes in on the need for social justice, in particular for black trans\* folks, nearly half of whom have been incarcerated at some point in their lives (Nichols 2013).[43] Miss Major served time at Sing Sing, Dannemora and Attica. At Dannemora guards shaved her completely bald, eyebrows included, to break her spirits, and made her walk through prison naked. She became close to Frank "Big Black" Smith in Attica.[44] Prison activist, author and philosopher Angela Davis comes to visit and speak, and she tells Miss Major,

"Of course, we are all connected, aren't we? It makes so much sense."

Earlier Miss Major had been part of the Jewel Box Revue. We see a picture of her with DeLarverie and others. She participated in the Stonewall riots with DeLarverie, Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson. She bristles at their erasure from historical accounts, and chastizes the media for portraying Rivera and Johnson as drug addicts and alcoholics.

Today Miss Major is profoundly gender-queer. An offscreen voice at the start of the film says of her:

"She doesn't care what you call her ... he or she, mother, father, grandmother, grandfather."

The camera pans over shoes, wigs, hats and dolls. Named "Major Gracy" at birth, Miss Major began taking hormones when young. An older queen helped her into a nice dress and make-up, she says, comparing herself to Natalie Wood's beautiful burlesque queen Gypsy Rose Lee in *Gypsy* (Mervyn Leroy, 1962). Her mother felt it was all a phase:

"She was sure I would become the man I was supposed to be. I *am* the man I was supposed to be."

Miss Major is "happy to be in a full beard and a dress—she just wants to be herself and be seen as herself," says someone else.

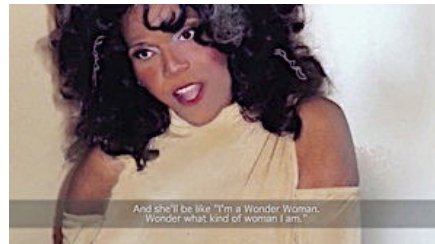




Though some of Miss Major's wigs and shoes are shown, clothes don't make the woman either. (Major!)



In a beautiful dress, with nicely applied make-up, Miss Major felt as lovely as Natalie Wood in *Gypsy* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1962). (Major!)



Miss Major: a woman wonder, a wonderful woman. (Major!)



The caption says it all: "The T comes first!" (Major!)



Miss Major, her son says, was a great dad. (Major!)

We see her with and without a wig, in suits, pants and dresses. Her son calls her "daddy" and refers to her as "a man." Most interviewees say "she." Many are her trans\* daughters. After their own release from prison they have themselves become activists. Time and again they attest to Miss Major's generosity and love. One says,

"She understands and she just accepts. It's what every family should be."

Begun in prison and extending outward and onward, her chosen family is very different from the largely middle class trans\* and queer families seen in mainstream news coverage or bigger budget films, other documentaries included.

Speaking at a ceremony celebrating the dedication of a building named in her and super butch Jay Toole's honor Miss Major exhorts the crowd:

"I love my community. You saved my life. Now go out and save somebody else's!"

The building houses five New York City organizations committed to social justice "for and by LGBTQ+ people of color and poor and low income people." Miss Major adds:

"And anybody who is 'Oh, I'm here about the GLBT ... No, no, no, motherfucker. The T comes first!'"

We see her in a trans\* pride parade waving to onlookers. She and Felicia Elizondo laugh together. (Elizondo was interviewed in *Screaming Queens*.) In her 70s when this film was made Miss Major, Elizondo and Tamara Ching are among the very few trans\* elders of color who are still alive.[45] But Miss Major's health is not good. She had a kidney transplant in 2008. She lost an eye to cancer. She walks with difficulty, using a cane. She has heart problems. She nonetheless insists:

"The thing that is amazing to me, it's not what I did, it's what I do now. It's who I help now."

The film's website invites visitors to "become part of Miss Major's Circle of Care,"





A lipstick Venn diagram shows Feinberg's place in two communities: lesbian and gay, and gendered. (*OUTLAW*)



On the street Feinberg is vulnerable yet powerful. (*OUTLAW*)



"We're still here!" and still fighting for justice. (*Major!*)

contributing monthly to help cover her rent, transportation, utilities, food, and home support (Floating Ophelia Productions 2018). We have a mandate "to take care of our elders who've taken such good care of us," a younger interviewee explains in the film.

The tone of each film's final sequence is telling. *OUTLAW* and *Miss Major!* are more combative, *The Pursuit* more congratulatory. On a mirror, Feinberg maps their place in two communities using lipstick: gay and lesbian *and* gendered. Most people, the diagram makes clear, are not. "I'm always fighting to define my own reflection," Feinberg has said in the opening gym scene in front of another mirror. The last images emphasize daily struggle:

"How would you feel every time you went to the bathroom...?"

The comment trails off, unfinished, leaving room for imagination but not for equivalence. We see Feinberg suit-clad, erect, claiming space on New York City's streets, vulnerable yet powerful, powerful yet vulnerable.

"Every day of my life is a struggle.... But this is a fight that's worth it."

*The Pursuit* ends more cheerfully. Although there is more to be done so much has been achieved. Change occurs "one story at a time." Well-shot and informative, the film on the whole practices what Valentine refers to as "the logic of inclusion," intermingling blacks and whites, lesbians, gay men and trans\* people, treating gay, lesbian, and transgender concerns as roughly analogous to each other, with gender just "another kind of social difference, structurally equivalent to but ontologically distinct from sexuality" (2007, 59).

*Major* concludes by recognizing community and family members who have recently passed away—of a heart attack, a car accident, an undiagnosed cancer, a stroke, a long-term illness. All were younger than 55 years old. Finally, after the credits, one after another, singly, in pairs and in groups, members of Miss Major's extensive chosen family chant:

- "I'm still here!"
- "I'm still fucking here!"
- "I'm still here!"
- "We're still here together!"

"That's a lot of trouble," says Miss Major, happily. The struggle will continue.

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Conclusion: ethics, editing, embodiment and experience



Marsha P. Johnson is finally the main subject in Michael Kasinski's documentary, *Pay It No Mind*.



Sylvia Rivera remained a fierce activist, even when older. (*Sylvia*)

As I have mentioned more than once, trans\* women and \*men of color in particular have been absent from documentary "hirstory." This is beginning to change, thanks in large part to dedicated trans\* and queer makers. Yet films have not yet been made about some of the trans\* folk who were leaders in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Most are now deceased, so documentaries about them will need to be some combination of archival footage, photo compilation, witness and/or expert testimony, recreations or fictional/documentary hybrids. Three recent documentaries about Marsha P. Johnson gesture toward the options. Michael Kasino's 2012 *Pay It No Mind: Marsha P. Johnson*, combines interviews with archival footage.[46] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] At one point Stonewall participant Danny Garvin comments:

"People get lost in the bigger picture of the story. We miss people who were bigger than life."

Also interviewed in *Stonewall Uprising*, Garvin might have been thinking about that film's failure to mention Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera or to interview Miss Major Griffin-Gracy and Stormé DeLarverie. *The Life and Death of Marsha P. Johnson* (David France, 2017) is more inventive. Here an amateur sleuth investigates the mysterious circumstances of Johnson's death—was it suicide or was it murder?—unveiling transphobia without solving the case.[47] The third, a short titled *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* (Reina Gossett and Sasha Wortzel, 2017), is entirely fictional. It offers a fantasy about another, better world.[48] The young Johnson (Mya Taylor) fantasizes about being a glamorous singer, then meets her friend, Sylvia Rivera (Eve Lindley), at the Stonewall to celebrate Johnson's birthday.[49] Emphasis is on dreams, friendships and relationships, in contrast to the many mainstream films that isolate, villify and target trans\* characters.

To date only one U.S. short, *Sylvia* (Tara Mateik and Denise Gaberman, 2002), [50] has been made about Sylvia Rivera. Together she and Johnson founded Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (S.T.A.R.). The short concentrates on Rivera's activism, even when on her deathbed in 2002. Puerto Rican actress Holly Woodlawn has been ignored as a documentary subject, though she performed in several films, appeared on many TV shows, and spoke in multiple documentaries about other people, among them *Beautiful Darling* and *Superstar in a Housedress*.



Also a Warhol Superstar, Holly Woodlawn is seen here in a glamour shot. (*Superstar*)



Born in 1886, a successful trans\* businesswoman, Lucy Hicks Anderson

	went to jail for living as a woman and marrying a man. ( <i>We've Been Around: Lucy Hicks Anderson</i> )



The media made Christine Jorgensen a household name in the 1950s. (*Christine in the Cutting Room*)



Concern around white femininity displaced anxiety around civil rights struggles, the Cold War and the bomb in the 1950s and 1960s. (*Christine*)

Hopefully her friend, *Wigstock* (1995) director Barry Shils, will make the documentary about her he dreams of. Stryker wrote me that he has a lot of footage (2017). No documentaries have yet been made about Tamara Ching or Felicia Elizondo. With trans\*latinx people among the poorest and most vulnerable (Horak 2018, 96), Felicia "Flames" Elizondo would make an inspiring documentary subject. Trans\* women like Lucy Hicks Anderson (1886-1954)—and Woodlawn, Rivera, Elizondo and Ching—are barely visible "shadows," their gender variance erased by "a persistent and animating [white] presence" (Snorton 2017, 141, 144).[51]



Too often the "good transsexual" has been the white trans\* woman, and she has been sanitized by the mainstream press to be respectable, glamorous and "womanly." Christine Jorgensen's international fame in the 1950s epitomized the way that "white screens" promoted alluringly feminine celebrities while ignoring carnage at home and slaughter abroad. Susan Stryker's as yet unfinished documentary, *Christine in the Cut*, is wound around these and other questions. Stryker uses a mix of archival media—photographs, newspaper coverage, films, television programs, songs, comic books—in combination with a fictitious, ghostly voice-over. Stryker wrote the guiding narration, which is read by a trans\* actor in "sometimes hallucinatory, sometimes reportorial" tones (Stryker 2013). The narrator ventriloquizes ideas that Jorgensen could not have known and would not have had when alive.[52] The images reach out and "touch" each other through dissolves, fades, and wipes. Speed is altered. Sound glitches and anachronistic electronica remind us that there are bumps in any system.



Jorgensen cut a lovely figure in fur.



As a young man Jorgensen was more

(Christine)	nondescript. (Christine)
	
A stand in for little Geroge Jorgensen, Jr./ Christine positions a Christmas camera as if it were a penis. (Christine)	Movies offer alluring models. (Christine)

Stryker aims for a haptic cinema which makes images and sounds tactile, visceral, closer to the body. She recognizes the need for fantasy at the same time as she wants her film to be critical, ethical. She reflects on documentary forms and traditions. She revisits and revises transphobic tropes about embodiment. Silent, handheld "before" moments show a child, a stand-in for little George William Jorgensen, Jr., at Christmas. The child wants the doll under the tree. His sister snatches it up. His father gives the child a camera instead. The child playfully positions the box camera in front of him as if it were a penis. In subsequent scenes young George and his family are shown in photographs and home movie footage. In some he is but a shadow, in others his mother interacts with a scarecrow in male clothing. As in *Beautiful Darling*, *Superstar in a Housedress* and *Major!* but more frenetically, movies offer other options. There is magic in piecing together, cutting, editing. Questioning history and "hirstory," embodiment and experience, Stryker understands the possibility of narrative as residing in the cut, in two senses: Jorgensen's physical transformation from male to female and her own editing of sounds and images. She argues that Jorgensen's global celebrity has more to do with post World War II U.S. hegemony and new techno-scientific conditions for the intelligibility of the body than with Jorgensen herself (Stryker, 2013).



There is magic in the cut. (Christine)

Stryker's film is the most experimental of the documentaries about 1950s, 1960s and 1970s trans\* documentary subjects I have surveyed here. From what I have seen to date, *Christine in the Cut* will be more interested in what Nichols calls the "expressive dimension" of documentary in that it will remind us

"that the world is more than the sum of the visible evidence we derive from it" (2001, 134).

Taken together, the omissions and the foci of these documentaries suggest perspectives and strategies for documentarians and today's pioneering LGBTQ+ subjects to reflect upon, choose among and develop. Although *Stonewall Uprising* does not identify its trans\* elder as trans\*, its intervention, too, is welcome, given the ongoing medical and legal regulation of trans\* and queer bodies and given the numerous mainstream films that portray trans\* people as victims or predators. In the United States we experience daily a neoliberal emphasis on an "equality" reliant on gendered and sexualized consumer identities. Let us not forget how much we need not only racial and economic recognition, but also, and crucially, racial and economic justice. Please let us not imagine that U.S. models are the only models, either: gender and sexuality are not the same the world over, and so much more than either gender or sexuality is at stake.



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### Notes

Acknowledgements: Many thanks to the two readers who commented on an earlier draft of this essay. Elizabeth Coffey Williams, Laura Horak, Alisa Lebow, Nicole Morse, Michelle Parkerson and Susan Stryker also provided valuable suggestions and information.

1. The term "transgender" meant different things in the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. In the 1970s and 1980s the word designated people who wanted to change their social gender through gender expression and hormones but usually not through surgery. In the 1990s the term referred to

"all kinds of variations from binary gender norms and expectations.... In recent years, some people have begun to use the term 'transgender' to refer *only* to those who identify with a binary gender other than the one assigned them at birth" (Stryker 2017, 36-7).

I think of "transgender" as encompassing the most widely imaginable range of gender-variant practices and identities. I use "trans\*" to indicate the multiple ways one can inhabit and declare embodiment, expression or identity, as attached to the prefix "trans," e.g. transman, transwoman, transmasculine, transfeminine, transgender, transsexual, transvestite. I also include butch lesbians, faeries, sissies, drag queens and kings, intersex people, and so on. See Halberstam 2018 1-44, Lair 2016, 248, note 3, and Tompkins 2014. At times I say "gender variant," as does e.g. Horak 2017. [[return to page 1](#)]

2. For Halberstam, "embodiment" can be viewed as housed in the flesh, as something more fluid or as

"a series of 'stopovers' in which the body is lived as an archive rather than a dwelling, and architecture is experienced as productive of desire and difference rather than just framing space" (2018, 24, invoking Crawford 2010).

The latter alternatives recognize that individuals change as they age. Memories often remain, though they too mutate.

3. Not all of the trans\* people who speak in these documentaries would answer to or describe themselves as "hir." The term is more recent, typically associated with femininity and/or femaleness. Other, more recent, gender-neutral formulations include "ze/zir," "they/their/them," and "s/he / her/him." Some people prefer "she/her" or "he/him." I use the gender pronouns heard in the films. Occasionally I say more in the text or in a note.

4. See further Gossett, Stanley and Burton 2017, xv, Morse 2016, Serano 2007, 35-52 and Seid 2014, 176-77.

5. I cannot provide information on availability outside the United States.

6. All subtitles come from something said by a trans\* documentary subject in that particular section.

7. The clip is embedded in a lecture Stryker gave at Macquarie University. See Stryker 2013.

8. In *Stonewall Uprising*, for example, Mike Wallace asserts in 1967 on *CBS Reports* that "there are no happy homosexuals" and describes homosexuality as a "mental illness" that has reached "epidemiological [sic] proportions." A 1966 Miami TV show is even more virulently homophobic: "they can be anywhere!"

9. Both films insert footage from the 1967 short, *Queens at Heart*.

10. *Before Stonewall: The Making of a Gay and Lesbian Community* (Greta Schiller and Robert Rosenberg, 1984) and *After Stonewall* (John Scagliotti, 1999) also position the Stonewall riots as key to lesbian and gay activism and history.

11. *Screaming Queens* also mentions housing discrimination.

12. Earlier moments of trans\* resistance to police repression occurred in 1959 at Cooper Do-Nut in Los Angeles and in 1965 at Dewey's lunch counter and coffee house in Philadelphia (Stryker 2017, 81-4).

13. Although Carter primarily interviewed gay men, in conclusion he calls the Stonewall Riots

"the critical turning point in the movement for the rights for gay men and lesbians as well as for bi- and transgendered people" (2010, 267).

14. A longer and more inclusive acronym would be LGBTIQQA: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersexual, queer, questioning, asexual, ally.

15. Ritter had gender reassignment surgery in the 1980s (American Experience, n.d.). Carter refers to Ritter using quotes around her birth name, "Steve," and chosen name, "Maria" (2010, 129-30, 319-20). No other interviewee's name appears in quotes.

16. Carter mentions Marsha P. Johnson by name (2010, 65-6). Both Johnson and Sylvia Rivera were dead when *Stonewall Uprising* was shot but Miss Major Griffin-Gracy and Stormé DeLarverie were alive. Davis and Heilbroner could have interviewed them, even though Carter did not mention them.

17. In 2017 Silverman directed a documentary about addiction and prison.

18. Davis was familiar with trans\* individuals and issues. She worked on *Paris Is Burning* (Jennie Livingston, 1990) and shot, produced, edited and directed *Southern Comfort* (2001), about trans\* man Robert Eads. Eads died of ovarian cancer when doctors refused to treat him. They thought to do so would damage their reputations. Heilbroner and she have also made other documentaries together, one about FBI arrests of people for "terrorism" within a Muslim community, another about the death of black activist Sarah Bland while in police custody following a routine traffic stop, a third about (cisgender) cosmetic surgery.

19. On the ethics of expository and participatory documentary see for example Nichols 2001, 105-9 and 115-23.

20. Several portrait documentaries have been made about Factory members, most of them since 2000. They include *Nico Icon* (Susanne Ofteringer, 1995), *Pie in the Sky: The Brigid Berlin Story* (Shelly Dunn Fremont, Vincent Fremont, 2000), *Excavating Taylor Mead* (William A. Kirkley, 2005), *Factory Girl* (about Edie Sedgwick) (George Hickenlooper, 2006), *Paul Morrissey, in the Flesh* (Karim Zeriah, 2008), *Little Joe* (Nicole Haeusser, 2009) and *Edie: Girl on Fire* (Melissa Painter, David Weison, 2010).

21. *Stormé* cost \$35,000 to make. (Michelle Parkerson, email to author, January



26, 2018).

22. Earlier Rasin made a documentary short about beat writer Herbert Huncke. After *Superstar* Highberger made a documentary feature about photographer Jack Mitchell.

23. The American Psychiatric Association listed "gender identity disorder" in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) until 2013. It now uses "gender dysphoria" but does not acknowledge that the pain and discomfort trans\* people feel is likely occasioned by family and societal disapproval, discrimination and violence.

24. Lebovitz's refusal to accept Darling as a woman resembles the exclusionary politics practiced by a minority of feminists in the 1970s. They refused to allow trans\* women to participate in marches and music festivals. See Rubin 2003, 63-92, Stryker 2017, 127-38, Valentine 2007, 149-53, and Williams 2016.

25. Sister Superstar and close friend Holly Woodlawn says about "Miss Curtis": "That tramp was to womanhood as snags are to nylons" (1991, 4).

26. Howard has directed trans\*-oriented fiction films, TV shows and documentaries, among them *By Hook or By Crook*, *Golden Age of Hustlers*, *More than T* and *Transparent*. Parkerson's other documentaries feature poet Audre Lorde and musician Betty Carter. [[return to page 2](#)]

27. DeLarverie and Jorgensen were both born in the early 1920s.

28. DeLarverie's mother was black, her father white (Yardley, 2014).

29. After this film was made DeLarverie was repeatedly named "Imperial King" in the Imperial Queens & Kings of Greater New York (Anon. 2017). Parkerson agreed with me that Stormé was "indeed a pioneer in LGBTQ history." She added:

"In current LGBTQ parlance [Stormé] would probably be referenced as Gender Non-Conforming" (Email to author, January 25, 2018).

30. Feinberg

"identified as an anti-racist white, working class, secular Jewish, transgender, lesbian, female, revolutionary communist" (Pratt 2014).

31. Lebow's other documentaries include an experimental video about lesbians and AIDS, a film about her and her then partner Cynthia Madansky as Jewish lesbians, and a collaborative video about international war crime tribunals.

32. One of Trachtman's earlier documentaries deals with a boy with Down syndrome, another with Latinx high school students who perform mariachi music. She has also directed episodes of TV series.

33. Ophelian had directed an earlier documentary, *Diagnosing Difference*, about the impact a diagnosis of "gender identity disorder" has on people.

34. "Everything else was in-kind: I edited ... at NYU and at Gay Men's Health Crisis, where I was working part time.... The sound problems and the white balance problems can attest to my lack of crew and lack of experience! I remember Debbie Zimmerman shaking her finger at me, as she was taking the video on at Women Make Movies for distribution, saying 'Promise me you'll never shoot near a heliport again!'" (Email to author, January 15, 2018).

35. "Transgender" has replaced "transgendered" to move away from the notion that choice (perhaps via hormones or surgery) is involved. "Transgendered" was more commonly heard in the 1990s. Many now consider it offensive, the equivalent of "colored."

36. In 1993 Feinberg published a book titled *Stone Butch Blues*. Some stone butches are now trans\* men. Feinberg's partner Minnie Bruce Pratt refers to Feinberg as "she" in the obituary she wrote (2014). Lebow told me:

"When I was working with Les, they were happy to be called either she or he, and never insisted on either.... However, given the cultural shifts that have happened since ..., I think it's probably appropriate to use the now commonly accepted 'they' to refer to Les. My default is still 'she,' but I'm having to rethink that" (Email to author, January 15, 2018). An online profile uses "ze" and "hir" (Jewish Women's Archive n.d.).

37. See Sedgwick 1993, 154-74 and Straayer 1997, 221. They explain that the psychiatric establishment's 1980 depathologizing of homosexuality and addition of a new category, "Gender Identity Disorder," fueled and sanctioned middle-class puritan biases against trans\* people.

38. In *Transgender Warriors* (1996) Feinberg views anyone who transgresses gender norms, among them basketball player Dennis Rodman, as "transgendered." While empowering in some ways because inclusive, the wide-ranging alignment of figures under a contemporary, Western, trans\* banner risks obscuring the ways that "gender" and "sexuality" are shaped in different ways by different cultures, at different times.

39. Violence against trans\* people, especially people of color, is at an all time high today (Gossett et al. 2017, xii). Media visibility can have the contradictory effect of contributing to increased violence and murders (Horak 2018, 97).

40. Asked what surprised her while making the film for an article in South Jersey's *Courier Post* Trachtman says she was struck by the sheer number of homeless LGBT youth she encountered.

"Forty percent of homeless youth are LGBT" (Paolino 2016).

41. Coffey Williams was the first woman to receive sexual reassignment surgery at Maryland taxpayer expense. Today she refers to herself as a woman with a transgender past. When young she acted in John Waters' *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble*. In the latter, playing "Earnestine," she kisses and hugs Divine (a gay man playing a woman, "Dawn Davenport") before Dawn's execution and proudly unveils her new female genitals. "Rather than be the joke, I got to make the joke," she told me, tears of gratitude in her eyes (Holmlund 2017, 149-50).

42. Other segments include trans\* individuals as well, but no one who was active in the 1950s, 1960s or 1970s.

43. 21% of trans\* women have been incarcerated (Ophelian in Nichols 2013).

44. Smith was chosen by inmates to be chief of security during the 1971 Attica riots. He was responsible for protecting outsiders brought in to negotiate an end to the crisis. He kept them all safe. Forty-three people died when state troopers stormed the prison and killed dozens of inmates and guards. Some of the surviving guards thought Smith had castrated a guard—untrue. They

"beat his testicles with their nightsticks and dropped lighted cigarettes and hot shell casings on his chest" (Martin 2004).

45. "The community is disproportionately devastated by HIV, mass incarceration, hate violence and homicide, suicide rates—we simply don't have as many members of the community who are elders" (Ophelian in Nichols 2013).

46. Kasino's film is available on Vimeo. His earlier shorts deal with a variety of subjects. He has also made a documentary about LGBT and sex freedom activist Randy Wicker. [[return to page 3](#)]

47. The film is available on Netflix. France also directed *How to Survive a Plague* (2012).

48. As of January 2019 I find no distributor.

49. Jay Toole, seen in *Major!*, plays an emcee. Silas Howard plays the manager of the Stonewall. Gossett directed an earlier short about Black queer/trans\* performer Egyptt LaBejia. Wortzel directed other gay-themed films earlier as well.

50. Mateik directed an earlier short about the difficulties trans\* people confront using gender segregated public restrooms. *Sylvia* is available from Video Data Bank and has been posted on YouTube.

51. A five minute short (Rhys Ernst, 2016) about Hicks Anderson, part of the TV show "We've Been Around," can be seen on YouTube.

52. See Skidmore 2011 on Jorgensen's avowed allegiance to white heteronormativity and middle class values in 1950s media coverage.

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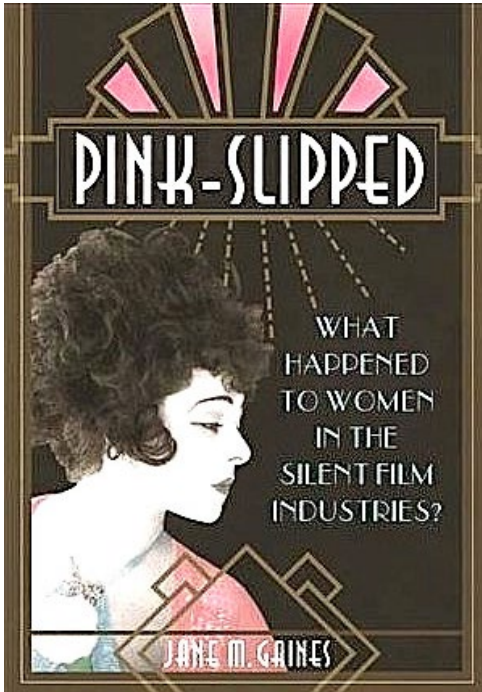
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## Writing less knowingly

review by [Rox Samer](#)

Gaines, Jane M. *Pink-Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries?* Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2018. 328 pg. \$29.95



*Pink-Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries?* poses its research question in its title. What author Jane M. Gaines means by this question, however, is in fact manifold. Given recent feminist scholarship documenting the many silent-era women working as actors, writers, directors, producers, often holding two or more of these positions across their careers or even at once, Gaines asks where they all went. What happened to make the numbers of women working in Hollywood as well as other silent film industries decrease in the 1920s, never again to reach the same heights? In a time when who is behind the camera, as well as in front of it, is of paramount concern as the gendered culture of film production is under scrutiny, a careful theorization of women's contributions to the medium during its formative years is welcome. By asking what happened to these women, Gaines is exploring more than how this earlier era came to an end; she is also asking when we knew as much and how. These questions have their own feminist stakes, as their answers account for how the study of gender and film developed the way it did in the 1970s and 80s. As a historian of feminist media of the 1970s myself, I find the exploration of these questions to be the book's most powerful contribution.

*Pink-Slipped* centers the challenges of writing about gender and film historically. Gender, once an unthinkable framework for scholarly study, as Gaines points out, has become a primary lens for film and media studies analysis. But by its very nature gender is constantly in flux, both as lived and as an analytical framework. Reading Gaines' book encourages us all to think more carefully about for whom (including which gendered subjects) and for when (including which gendered present and future) we write. Gaines' own study of how the history of silent-era film women was written, including by whom, at what time, and with access to which resources, pushes all readers to reflect on the history of cinema and media studies with both critical exactitude and generosity.

While 1970s feminist film scholars looked back over film history to the emergence of the medium and establishment of various film industries and found few women there (Alice Guy Blaché, Dorothy Arzner, Louis Weber), today feminist film scholars are finding there were more women working in film in the 1900s, 1910s, and early 1920s than during any period since. Gaines chronicles the debate about exact numbers of women and dates of contributions, but she also contends that women now appear to have contributed substantial labor to silent film production. Women wrote scripts, worked as "joiners" and "cutters" in editing rooms, and served as stenographers and secretaries. Many women worked in various positions over the course of their careers, and as film production was still in the process of standardizing its labor, the responsibilities of any of their given positions were relatively fluid.

How did 1970s feminist film scholars miss these below-the-line women workers?



Alice Guy Blaché was a silent era filmmaker central to early feminist film studies.



Dorothy Arzner was a silent and Classical Hollywood filmmaker central to early feminist film studies.

Gaines, herself a formative contributor to feminist film studies, explains that this oversight was a result of how feminist scholars imagined their historical subjects and the kinds of women they were looking for. Film studies, then taking flight from literature, could find no cinematic equivalents to Jane Austen or George Eliot. Gaines argues that in looking for feminist precursors—rebellious and independent larger-than-life auteurs, who could serve as beacons of strength and resistance—she and her colleagues missed the film workers who kept the fledgling ship of film production running and brought their perspectives as women to the stories being told and their telling.[1] As a result, feminist film studies turned to the more theoretically productive “absence” of women, which produced the now canonical theories of Woman as a sign of non-male other and object of the male gaze.

Erin Hill’s *Never Done: A History of Women’s Work in Media Production* (2016), shows that women’s names were to be found in silent-era film credits and she documents and theorizes their labor. Such a study, Gaines contends, is indicative of what newer generations of feminist film scholars are seeking. Less committed to finding strong leaders and more curious about changes in historical discourse with regard to gender inside and outside the film industry, younger feminist film scholars have studied the gendered labor of female studio employees (Erin Hill), the feminist antics of slapstick comediennes (Maggie Hennefeld), and the plentiful cross-dressing of silent-era actresses on screen and off (Laura Horak).[2] These scholarly studies were published at virtually the same time that filmmaker Su Friedrich was researching women film editors and launching a website profiling their work (“Edited By”, <http://womenfilmeditors.princeton.edu>) and that Hollywood was making a film about NASA black women computers (*Hidden Figures*)— the 1950s and 60s mathematical equivalent of a secretary.[3] Gaines claims, following Joan Scott, that historical subjects are written so as to be “meaningful” for the present: “Try as we might to dispassionately explain *their* times,” Gaines writes, “we will still speak of them through *our* moment.”[4] If women who were unimaginable to 1970s feminist film scholars were written out of the historical records, they are being written back in as they become imaginable to younger generations.

## “Edited by” The companion film

This film represents the work of the sixty-five women on the site who are editors by profession. I hope later to make a second film showing samples of work by the seventy-four “filmmakers who edit.”

And here is a list of all the films that are included in this film.

Su Friedrich’s *Edited By* website and film profiles the contributions of women editors over the years.

For Gaines, acknowledging these changes opens up a space of generative thinking

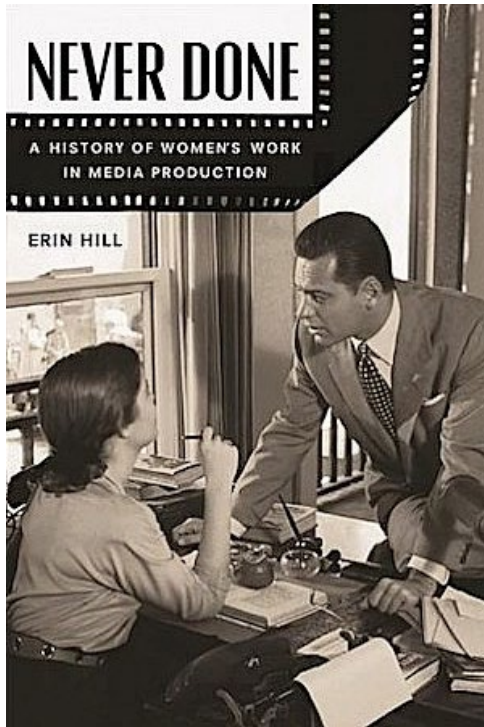


*The Mysterious Lady* (1928) was edited by “cutter” Margaret Booth.

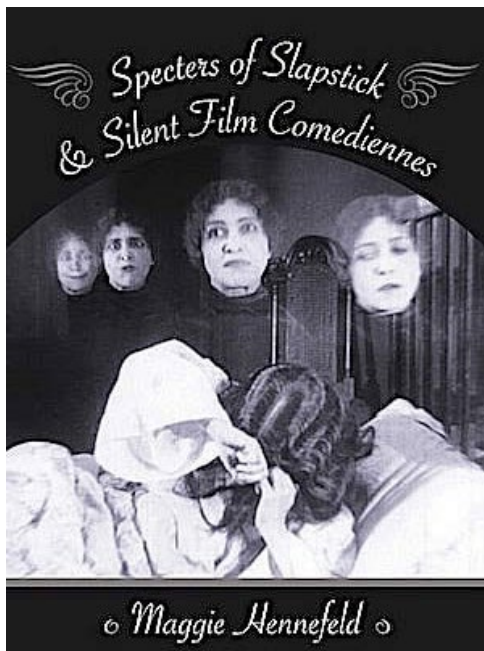
between generations: how did early film women imagine they could change the world, how could 1970s feminist film scholars not imagine them imagining as much, and what has changed so that we are now able to begin to imagine their imagining? This in turn provokes Gaines to ask what it might be that we cannot imagine in our present—what is currently unthinkable but may too someday come to be thinkable re: gender, media, and history? How to study that which is “beyond current comprehension”? Or, perhaps more aptly, how to do feminist historiography in manner that not only creates room for but invites the presently unthinkable?

Gaines makes the compelling contention that historians should write less knowingly. The philosophical questions she poses are not rhetorical. Instead, she advocates for approaches to feminist historiography that leave the productiveness of such questions’ hugeness intact while offering concrete solutions that tether a particular feminist study in time. While the historian is always looking elsewhere, it is the historiographer’s job to remember to locate the historian in time—to theorize that present from which they write even as they acknowledge their future readers will be of different presents themselves. The feminist historian/historiographer, Gaines argues, should acknowledge their own desires for their historical subjects, but they also ought to resist paradigm-altering claims that are only likely to be overturned, proved obsolete, as new forms of evidence become available and new methods of analysis are employed. Digital technologies, the data they make available, and the digital-humanities approaches that scholars bring to them make a case in point for Gaines. She wonders if silent film scholars working with digital materials may have gotten ahead of the evidence. When it comes to matters of restoration and recovery, the part digital/part photochemical films that result both are and are not the motion pictures they once were. Louis





Erin Hill's *Never Done: A History of Women's Work in Media Production* (2016) studies the gendered labor of female studio employees.



Maggie Hennefeld's *Specters of Slapstick and Silent Film Comediennes* (2018) examines slapstick comediennes' contributions to the development of film language and the gendered politics of comedy in the silent era.

Webber's *Shoes* (1916), for example, is "all of the following: the film original material, the archival object, 'the work,' and...one copy as well as all of the copies of the material that constitutes 'the film.'"[6] How to write about such a "film" and keep these complexities at hand?

Meanwhile, what exactly does digitizing the records of silent film production enable? More searchable access to data such as digitized payroll records, for example, affirms for Gaines the theory that the management system that would eventually squeeze out women from the top ironically relied on women as stenographers, accountants, payroll clerks, and secretaries, their job classifications aligning with lower weekly pay.[7] Digital archives' keyword searches also reveal that more women were categorized as "producers" than "directors," data thus having the potential to guide the researcher in new directions.[8] But Gaines also questions what gets lost in the enumeration of women's contributions to silent film production. If we cannot know women's agency or aspirations from counting things, how much more do we really know about what "happened" to them? Furthermore, data is quite often already algorithmically programmed, meaning issues common to the organization of analog archives, which often lead some women's histories to becoming more accessible than others', can also be found in the digital.[9] Ultimately, it is Gaines' position that whatever methods historiographers use, they keep the unknowable, unthinkable, and unsayable in mind as they research and write.

Embracing historical research as "an interminable, never-ending project,"[10] Gaines offers readers a revitalization of historical time by way of film melodrama theory. "[W]hile the historian deals with the dilemmas of temporal imbalance and irreversibility by writing *around* them," Gaines explains, "melodrama *uses* them to its own hyperbolic ends." [11] The past is now a former present which anticipated a future; the present a former future, now passing and becoming a past for a future present; and the future a future present, Gaines explains, building upon the philosophical insights of Gilles Deleuze and Reinhart Koselleck. This causes researchers to operate in a constant state of temporal uncertainty.[12] But no one knows better the irreversibility of time and asymmetry of temporal modes than melodrama's fallen woman, ostracized for having a (sexual) past and considered to have no future. Both the researcher and the fallen woman, faced with the fact that the past is both present and lost forever, experience what Gaines calls the "everyday uncertainties of historical time," i.e. the "consequences of the shifting between modes of historical time," major life choices guided and determined not only by what choice but when.[13] Historians, inclined to flatten out the wrinkles caused by the ever-shifting relations of past, present, and future, would do well, Gaines boldly claims, to learn from their dramatization in melodrama. Through melodrama the temporal anxiety of everyday life and philosophy's paradox of temporal co-existence become crises with consequences-in-time.

Melodrama guides viewers from one "now" to another, and familial issues remain in constant tension, as past events cannot be revisited and future events remain inaccessible. This dramatization aids the historian in seeing the peculiarity of historical time, including that of its chance happenings, which cannot be made to follow from earlier events. Understanding melodrama brings to the fore the affective force of the historian's location-in-time quandary as well as the historiographer's problematic of historical time, whereby we can never return to a historical past but can only access it through our own and others' writing of it.

Gaines repeatedly cautions against essentializing understandings of gender, rehearsing the main points of the now decades-long body of scholarship on the construction of gender and limits of "woman" as a conceptual category, and she makes a few nods to how transgender studies "troubles old gender categories." [14] However, the potential productive tensions to be explored around a feminist historiographer's use of "woman" and "women"—such as what these



*Hidden Figures* (2016) tells the story of NASA's black women computers, whose work was integral to the Space Race in the 1960s.



Louis Webber's *Shoes* (1916), recovered through a combination of digital and analog procedures, presents challenges to researchers' notion of "the work."

silent era film women might have meant by naming themselves "women" (if they did so) and what we mean by using such a designation now—remain largely out of frame. Gaines' discussion of enumerating women of silent film history through new methods of data accumulation and analysis that make silent film workers' names, positions, and pay searchable would be enriched by questioning what knowledge a name produces. Such epistemological questions would be in line with the study philosophically. When addressing transgender studies and the "demands" placed on "women" and "gender," Gaines cites David Valentine's *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (2007) and Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004). Those anxious to extend Gaines' thinking about gender, film history, and feminist historiography to the new lines of thought, heuristics, and methods of analysis offered by transgender studies, including transgender media studies, would be rewarded in consulting the recent scholarship of Laura Horak, Cael M. Keegan, Quinlan Miller, and Eliza Steinbock.[15]

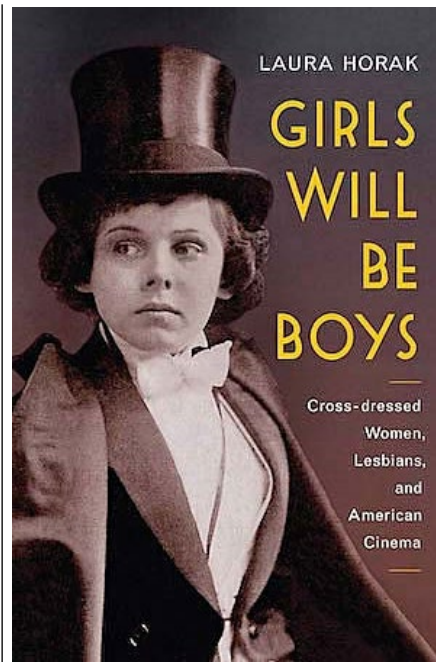
These recent trans approaches to the study and philosophy of film and media history would have been especially welcome in sections of Gaines's book like "Gender Assignment: Why Not Men?," where the troubling metaphors of gender transition common to 1970s and 80s feminist film theory resurface.[16] In this chapter, another entitled "The World Export of 'The Voice of the Home,'" and the conclusion that follows, Gaines makes the compelling claim that one reason why women working in silent film industries may have been steadily replaced by men in the 1920s and 30s is that their "female perspectives" had over the course of the preceding decades become codified in U.S. genre film and the melodramatic mode in particular. They would continue to exist in the film industry when they were no longer there. Gaines contends, following Ann Snitow, that "women" became a "genre" or "fiction" into which men could step. Gaines is clear that she is speaking to gender's functioning across specific historical and cultural contexts, rather than to the identities of individual film workers, but one wonders why she relies on vocabulary so central to trans experience, such as "gender reassignment," when doing so:

"There is a better course—to find values located in conventions rather than inscribed in persons gendered one way or another, opening the door to seeing 'female' values as historically *assigned* to women rather than men. Since, in another ordering of world cultures, these values might well have been awarded to men, we cannot help but envision their gender *reassignment*. This is especially because *someone* needs to take on the emotional labor of 'feeling more,' and we're right to keep asking why women are always tasked with it." [17]

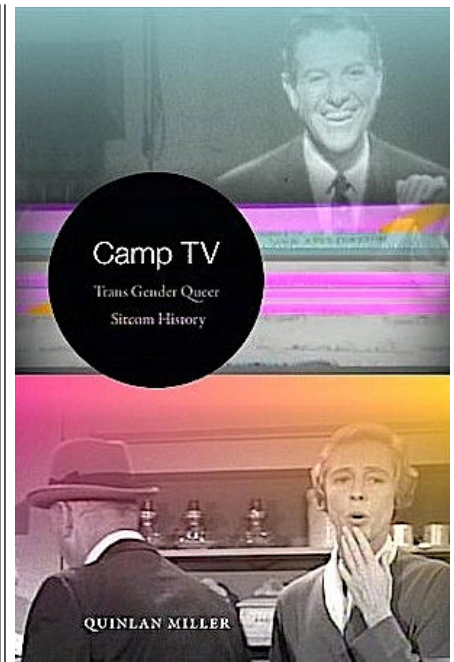
The neglect of the resonance today of such playful words and the return to "women" as social subjects at end of such a passage keep the cis woman as the focus of the study of gender and film. The opportunity to connect her at least theoretically to femmes of all genders (with regard to emotional labor) and trans subjects, many of whom experience gender reassignment as not only not metaphorical but as a stringent process of institutional management, is lost. Theories of trans as genre—including Keegan's aforementioned work as well as Sandy Stone's foundational essay "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto" (1987)—are likewise absent.[18] Gaines is especially interested in questions of temporality and the relationship between whom historians write about and who they take themselves and their readers to be (one chapter is titled "Are They 'Just Like Us'"), and her charge to theorize the differences between "their" dreams and aspirations and "ours" (as well as those of unknowable, unthinkable gendered futures) could be extended to the consideration of imagining not only present but future transfeminisms.







Laura Horak's *Girls Will Be Boys: Cross-Dressed Women, Lesbians, and American Cinema, 1908-1934* (2016) offers an approach to the study of gender and silent cinema that incorporates questions and methods of transgender studies.



Quinlan Miller's *Camp TV: Trans Gender Queer Sitcom History* (2019) exemplifies how a historical production studies project might avoid cisnormative assumptions about the gender identities of performers, writers, and other media workers.

*Pink-Slipped* spans diverse subfields and theoretical areas of interest, and it is an immensely powerful and compelling a read. First and foremost among its audience are those scholars of silent cinema who, like Gaines, are thinking about the methods they bring to this era's research and the historical paradigms by which we frame this era's cinema. But it will also be of interest to scholars such as me, who, if not researching this same period's history, are working through similar questions with regards to the theorization of historical writing and gender. Across the book Gaines engages deeply and meaningfully with the philosophical writing of Gilles Deleuze, Reinhart Koselleck, Michel Foucault, Joan Scott, and others on history, temporality, and historiography. Cinema and media studies scholars working with this theory would be encouraged to pick-up *Pink-Slipped*—and turn to “Introduction: What Gertrude Stein Wonders about Historians” and “Chapter 2: Where Was Antonia Dickson? The Peculiarity of Historical Time” in particular.

*Pink-Slipped* is not for the casual reader. Its prose demands sustained engagement. Sticking with the book till the end proves rewarding, especially moving through Gaines' posing of huge epistemological and methodological questions to her ultimate proffering of the melodrama theory of historical time and its particular relevance to the study of women in silent film industries. If the “what happened” questions posed in the introduction remain unanswered, or unanswered in the ways one might have expected, their unanswerability has been explained and the theoretical journey their asking initiated completed—for now.

Considering the centrality of gender as a framework to cinema and media studies and *Pink-Slipped's* return to the discipline's formative moment, Gaines' book is a necessary read for any and all reflecting on where “we” have been and where “we” are going next.





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### Notes

1. Jane M. Gaines, *Pink-Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries?* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 115-16. [[return to text](#)]
2. Erin Hill, *Never Done: A History of Women's Work in Media Production* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2016); Maggie Hennefeld, *Specters of Slapstick and Silent Film Comediennes* (Columbia University Press, 2018); and Laura Horak, *Girls Will Be Boys: Cross-Dressed Women, Lesbians, and American Cinema, 1908-1934* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2016).
3. Margaret Weitekamp made this point about female computers as mathematical secretaries in "Star Trek and Actual Space with Margaret Weitekamp," Episode 19, *How Do You Like It So Far?* podcast, hosted by Henry Jenkins.
4. Gaines, 203.
5. Gaines, 196-203.
6. Gaines, 81.
7. Gaines, 135.
8. Gaines, 149.
9. Gaines, 155-57.
10. Gaines, 146.
11. Gaines, 97.
12. Gaines, 44.
13. Gaines, 99.
14. Gaines, 35-37 and 118-119.
15. Each of these authors have published a number of contributions to this field in recent years. I would especially recommend checking out their book projects:
  - Laura Horak, *Girls Will Be Boys: Cross-Dressed Women, Lesbians, and American Cinema, 1908-1934* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2016);
  - C  l M. Keegan, *Lana and Lilly Wachowski: Sensing Transgender* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2018);
  - Quinlan Miller, *Camp TV: Trans Gender Queer Sitcom History* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019); and
  - Eliza Steinbock, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019).

In her essay "Tracing the History of Trans and Gender Variant Filmmakers,"

Horak surveys the history of trans and gender variant people working in film, which she shows to be virtually as long as the history of the medium itself. Laura Horak, "Tracing the History of Trans and Gender Variant Filmmakers," *Spectator* 37.2 (Fall 2017): 9-20. As she notes at the end of the essay, Horak is also in the process of creating an online research portal devoted to trans and gender variant filmmakers from the silent era to present. Finally, in an in an essay especially relevant to historiographies of gender and media, Miller and Erica Rand take readers into the archive of TV actor Ann B. Davis and offer a series of methods and approaches to reading the gender nonconformity of performing media workers. Quinlan Miller and Erica Rand, "Hot for TV, Hot for Ann B.: Ann B. Davis, Queer Attractions, and Trans Media," *Spectator* 37.2 (Fall 2017): 30-39.

16. Enumerable critiques have been made of Laura Mulvey's description of the female film spectator as a figurative "transvestite" and Mary Ann Doane's similar theorizing of female spectatorship as a form of cross-dressing. Consider reading Chris Straayer's critique and critical rethinking of such metaphors and their figuration on screen. Chris Straayer, *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-Orientations in Film and Video* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

17. Gaines, 168.

18. Sandy Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto" (4.0 version, including history of essay's publication dating back to "late 1987"), accessed April 11, 2019, <https://sandystone.com/empire-strikes-back.pdf>. See also the special issue of *Somatechnics* edited by Keegan, Horak, and Steinbock, including their introduction. Cáel M. Keegan, Laura Horak and Eliza Steinbock, "Cinematic/Trans\*/Bodies Now (and Then, and to Come)," *Somatechnics* 8.1 (March 2018): 1-13.

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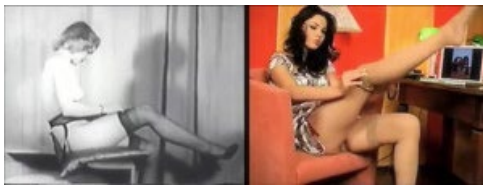


# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



On her Vimeo page, Proctor places her film and Conner's side-by-side, indicating her authorial debt and inviting viewers to compare the two films.



In *A Movie* and *A Movie By Jen Proctor*, juxtaposed together. Recycled tropes are revealed through framing and mise-en-scène.



Abigail Child's use of repetition and looping in *Covert Action* (1984) recasts the performative merriment of its source material (an ad) into a sinister exploration of gender relations and objectifying gestures.

## Found-footage, violence, and pedagogy: two films by Jennifer Proctor, and interview with Jen Proctor

by [Sonia Lupher](#)

Media artist Jennifer Proctor's work ranges from personal to rigorously analytical, and it is always imbued with questions of spectatorship, authorship, and representation. Her films often function as conversations with film and media texts, audiences, and her predecessors or contemporaries in avant-garde filmmaking. Proctor works with experimental documentaries, handmade films, video essays, and web-based voodles (video doodles), but she is perhaps best known for her found-footage work, in particular her 2010–2012 film *A Movie By Jen Proctor*, a remake—or, as she also puts it, “cover”—of Bruce Conner's seminal *A Movie* (1958). [1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) The idea to remake *A Movie* came to Proctor through her teaching; she was fascinated by the ways her students reacted to the film without knowing Conner's influential role in the U.S. avant-garde. While Proctor admits that the idea of remaking such a canonical piece seemed “ridiculous” at first, the process revealed the composition of Conner's film in ways that had not previously been evident to Proctor as a viewer and instructor (MacDonald 86).

The process of learning through doing is crucial to Proctor's creative, analytical, and pedagogical ventures. Because these three aspects of her work complement and influence each other, her films are most fruitfully discussed in light of their analytical and pedagogical purposes. Two of her recent films, *Nothing a Little Soap and Water Can't Fix* (2017) and *Am I Pretty?* (2018), unite analysis and pedagogy in order to critique violence against women in particular. These two films are valuable additions to the lineages of found-footage and feminist avant-garde filmmaking practices. Their didactic motives are subtly woven into Proctor's formal structure, predominantly in her use of repetition, which reveals and scrutinizes deleterious visual patterns of representing women's bodies.

Like many other feminist found-footage experimental films—notably by Peggy Ahwesh, Abigail Child, Su Friedrich, and Leslie Thornton—*Nothing a Little Soap and Water Can't Fix* and *Am I Pretty?* “engage in complex, dialectical relationships with the media and popular culture” (Wees, “Carrying On” 73). Proctor also shares with these filmmakers a critical engagement with the body, which—as Paul Arthur points out—re-emerged centrally in the work of 1980s avant-garde filmmakers such as Thornton and Friedrich, following a period of structural film that focused on the apparatus. Furthermore, *Soap and Water* and *Am I Pretty?* at once demonstrate Proctor's creative investments and her personal perspective as a cinephile, a consumer of media, and a feminist pedagogue. *Soap and Water* is compiled out of footage from popular narrative cinema in order to make explicit how women's bodies are framed in bathtubs and how the bathroom space is coded as uniquely feminine. *Am I Pretty?* turns to digital media; its



In *Sink or Swim* (1990), Su Friedrich uses found-footage from television to illustrate the sights and sound of her upbringing.



In the section "Temptation" from *Sink or Swim*, Friedrich uses footage from a women's bodybuilding competition while relating her childhood fascination with the Greek myth of Atalanta.

footage is appropriated from a series of YouTube videos made by teen girls.

*Soap and Water* and *Am I Pretty?* complement each other in three primary ways. Firstly, the former emphasizes visual representation, while the latter boldly obscures the image in favor of sound. Secondly, the footage from *Soap and Water* is appropriated from narrative films (in other words, it focuses expressly on fiction), while *Am I Pretty?* appropriates material from the "confessional" genre of YouTube videos—which themselves formally recall the video diary format and serve as documents of users' lives. [2] Finally, albeit in different ways, *Soap and Water* and *Am I Pretty?* both draw attention to pervasive patterns of visual objectification and internalized acceptance of violence against women in dominant media forms.

This article is principally concerned with reading *Soap and Water* and *Am I Pretty?* as companion pieces whose divergent formal preoccupations invite critical reflection on commonplace audiovisual representations of women, particularly those which encourage viewers' passive absorption of gendered imagery and violence. I argue that Proctor's commitment to pedagogy cannot be separated from the formal and critical objectives of her creative work: they deconstruct their respective source material in order to make visible patterns of gendered violence in dominant media without punishing viewers for enjoying the media in its original form. Instead, Proctor guides her viewers to come to certain conclusions on their own. Because *Soap and Water* and *Am I Pretty?* share objectives and strategies with video essays, it is also illuminating to consider the two films' ideological objectives alongside video essay scholarship, even though they cannot neatly be categorized in this way. In the following article, I will examine how these profoundly pedagogic films inherit and evince the legacies of feminist avant-garde filmmaking and analytical traditions of academic film study.

<p>On the title page, "Soap and Water" appears alone and the other words fade in around it.</p>	<p><i>Am I Pretty?</i> shares similarities with the <i>Soap and Water</i> title sequence, particularly in its use of pink and purple colors to denote feminine-coded colors and conventions.</p>

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Nothing a Little Soap and Water Can't Fix



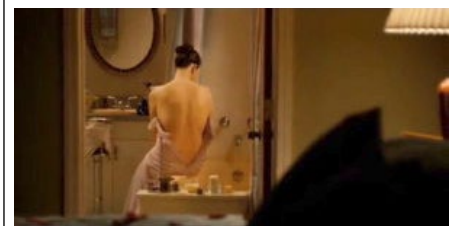
*Soap and Water's* opening sequence emphasizes repetitions in intrusive and voyeuristic shots in scenes of women in bathrooms.

*Nothing a Little Soap and Water Can't Fix* is constructed from brief scenes appropriated from over ninety films, many of which are mainstream titles. The films vary in nationality, time period (ranging from 1944 to 2015), and genre; they feature romantic comedies (*Bridget Jones's Diary*, 2001), science fiction (*Brazil*, 1985), crime (*The Man Who Wasn't There*, 2001), and especially horror (*Carrie*, 1976; *Hostel: Part II*, 2007; *Silence of the Lambs*, 1991), among other popular genres. Because Proctor's meticulous continuity at once invites a narrative reading of their activities as unified and reveals the differences between the women (both as actresses and characters), I will refer to the bathers alternately as "she" and "they" in the following description.

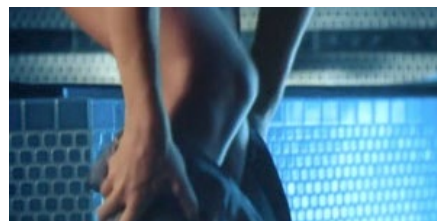
Running just short of ten minutes long, *Soap and Water* is organized according to segments unified by gestures, activities, and degree of voyeuristic framing. The film begins with shots of bathroom doors, obscuring the bather from view behind partially-open doors with only the sounds of splashing to indicate her presence. These excerpts are ordered to look as though the doors are "opening"; the first in the sequence shows a nearly-closed door, the door in the second shot is slightly more ajar, and finally a woman's arm is visible over the bathtub lip in the third shot, which appears to be from a child's point of view. Proctor then assembles several shots that minimally reveal the bathers, many of these following intruding figures. Shots of figures closing the bathroom door on the women give brief closure to this initial sequence.



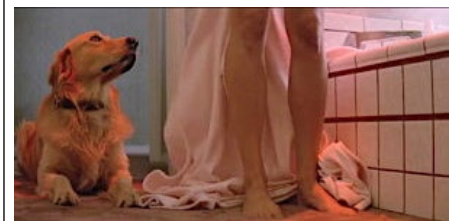
This woman undresses with her back to the camera, revealing the partial nudity of her exposed shoulder and lower back.



A second shot similarly frames this woman's back and shoulders, while her dress covers her rear.

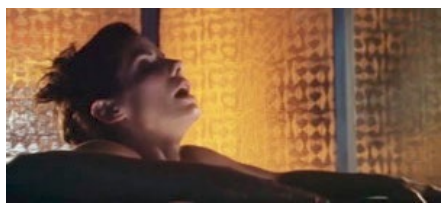



A close-up on this woman's legs, shot from bathtub height, implies the offscreen nudity above the frame and focuses on the gesture of stepping out of her clothing.



A similar shot in medium close-up shows this woman's legs from the knee down as she removes her robe.

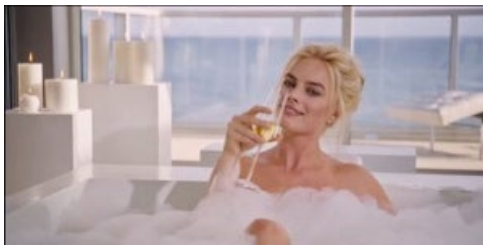


	
Shot from just above the edge of the bathtub, this woman takes a relaxing pose as she settles into the tub: head back, mouth ajar.	This nearly identical shot shows another woman resting in the bathtub. Both are shot in profile, emphasizing their open mouths as a gesture of relaxation.



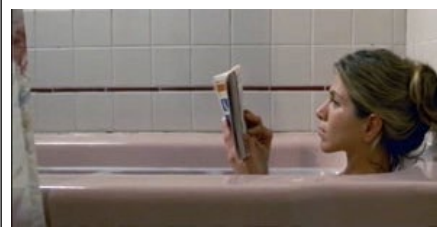
Drinking wine is one of many bathtub-related activities featured in *Soap and Water*. Here, the drinker is looking offscreen, presumably at another figure.

The rest of *Soap and Water* is organized somewhat chronologically in terms of bathtub-related activities. First are several shots of women turning on the bathroom light and preparing the bath; close-ups on hands and feet turning faucets and testing water temperature give visual continuity to these distinct images. Bathtubs fill, candles are lit. Women pull back their hair and begin to undress. Several shots edited in succession demonstrate the same shot composition, recycled across several decades of film history, of a woman removing her robe with her back to the camera. As they undress, the cameras focus on fragments: backs, legs, feet. The women step into the bathtub and sit, sigh, cry, or hum to themselves. They touch or brush their hair. They drink wine, they read, they look distressed. They wash themselves or shave their legs. The shot



This woman drinks champagne, looking at the camera in a direct address. Like in the previous shot, the presence of another figure (diegetic or otherwise) is implied.

compositions continue to accentuate body parts, particularly legs and soap-covered arms. They masturbate; external objects or people touch or titillate them. They submerge themselves and are shot from underwater, with distorted reverse-shots of people looking down at them. They are startled or emerge abruptly to the surface. They rest their eyes or fall asleep. Then, abruptly, they scream; they are forced underwater; they are attacked and they struggle. Their hands grasp the edge of the bathtub. They are drenched in blood; they are dead; bathtubs drain around their corpses or their killers clean up. Other figures discover their bodies; their bodies disintegrate or decompose. In the film's final shot (appropriated from *The Shining*, 1980), one decaying woman comes, terribly, back to life.



*Soap and Water* reveals reading as another common bathtub activity. In this shot, the camera is placed intimately at the level of the tub, and only the bather's head and hands are visible.



In contrast to the previous image, the camera faces this bather and reveals more of her body. Like the previous reader, her mouth is slightly ajar; her attention is focused entirely on the book.



This bather looks to the top right of the frame, where a (male) figure appears looking down at her. Her smile is at once demure and alluring; she does not seem to mind the intrusion.



Like the previous bather, this woman seems aware of an intruding figure. Her mouth is slightly ajar in a vague smile and she is looking up, implying that the other figure is standing and looking down at her.



In *The Man Who Envied Women*, Jack Deller (William Raymond) speaks in front of a screen projecting Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity*, who stands in for the female relationships in his life.

Proctor's attention to visual patterns is evident in *Soap and Water*'s meticulous organization. She demonstrates through repetition how many of these scenes and shots—representing multiple decades and genres of film—are nearly identical to one another, and how familiar they are to seasoned viewers. The film recalls Yvonne Rainer's *The Man Who Envied Women* (1985) in appropriating excerpts from earlier films as a way to “re-imagine” cinematic texts (Fischer 1). [3] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) At the same time, Proctor's organizational strategies demand critical reflection on specific activities that can be associated with women in bathtubs—from pleasure and relaxation to intrusion and murder. Furthermore, her transitions and use of sound contribute to sudden tonal shifts throughout *Soap and Water*'s short duration. For instance, the loud sequence of women emerging from underwater transitions abruptly to a shot (followed by seven more like it) of a woman falling asleep. This subdued sequence, in turn, is disturbed when a ghostly figure rises from the tub and shrieks.

Proctor worked with sound and video artist Cecil Decker to develop the sound design from appropriated footage of a different kind—she credits fifty-two FreeSound.org sound effects and estimates that she retained 40% of the sound from the selected scenes. Proctor and Decker's sound design works to supplement the original sound “to provide a more continuous texture” [4]. These tonal shifts (as well as the brooding “room tone” sound effect) endow the entirety of the film with an underlying agitation. Because few viewers will identify each film in



In the same scene, Jack Deller (now played by Larry Loonin) speaks in front of a screen projecting *Night of the Living Dead*. Rainer uses found-footage as a stand-in for Jack's absent ex-wife.

context (or even the genres to which they belong), the original objectives of each scene are often obscure.

Above all, *Soap and Water* is critical of how films represent violence against women. In this way, the film reflects important aspects of Proctor's pedagogy. In the classroom, she emphasizes the importance of process as a crucial element of learning and retaining information. In a 2011 article co-written for *Jump Cut* with River E. Branch and Kyja Kristjansson-Nelson, Proctor updates (or "reduces") Michelle Citron and Ellen Seiter's 1981 article "The Woman With the Movie Camera," also published in *Jump Cut*. Both articles are pedagogically oriented and address the problematic gender dynamics at play in the production classroom—problems that largely stem, both articles argue, from broader limitations placed on women pursuing a production career and the influence of a dominant media output that normalizes sexualization of and violence against women.



In this shot, the bather extends her arms over her head to submerge herself underwater.



This bather takes a similar position as she plunges underwater. In both shots, it is implied that they are alone in the bathroom, and that this is a private gesture.



Following several shots of women submerged underwater, the next series of shots function as POV "reverse-shots" of men looking at the women (or their bodies) from above.



In both shots, the bathwater distorts the assailants' faces, while the low-angle camera position suggests his dominance over the bather.



This bather relaxes in the bathtub with her eyes closed and mouth slightly open. The camera's position between her legs emphasizes the intimacy of the scene.

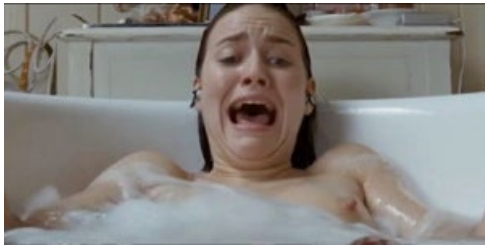


Another relaxing bather takes a similar stance. Once again, the camera is positioned between the bather's legs. The close framing foregrounds her vulnerability.





This bather closes the relaxation sequence when she is attacked in the bathtub and begins to scream. This scene shifts abruptly in tone from relaxation to panic.



Although the lighting changes substantially from the previous shot to this one, this bather appears similarly interrupted and the camera is positioned to show the bather's frantic expression.



Here, the assailant remains out of the frame, and the camera focuses entirely on the bather's face as she is strangled in the bathtub.



Here, the camera is similarly focused on the bather's face during the scene of violence, highlighting her suffering



Proctor, Branch, and Kristjansson-Nelson conclude that little has changed since 1981: echoing Citron and Seiter, they frequently observe violent, sexist, or racist content in their students' media production, usually played for comedy and stylistic edginess. This is because, as they write, "all young people going into media production have been influenced by pervasive, damaging, and often violent representations of women onscreen" ("Redux"). Like Citron and Seiter, Proctor et al. identify the lack of female role models in dominant production as a significant reason for this poor representation and the comparatively miniscule amount of women who enroll in production courses at the university level. [5]




Students' emulation—or, as Proctor et al. put it, "replication"—of dominant trends of representation in media is not something for which they should be punished or even, necessarily, of which they should be ashamed. Rather, Proctor uses these opportunities to guide students to self-critique. The uncensored and candid teaching philosophy that Proctor et al. outline in their text therefore reflects Proctor's creative methodology:

"we find that simply prohibiting storytelling elements such as depictions of violence shuts down a critique of both production and reception. Bans ensure that ... we fail to intervene in the larger cycle of media productions" ("Redux").

In class, therefore, Proctor aims to make students aware of their unconscious repetition of negative trends in dominant cinema and television (namely violence against women or sexualization) by analyzing these trends as a group. Just as she remains aware that banning or harshly criticizing such student work will prevent open conversations that could lead to more progressive self-critique, *Soap and Water* uses repetition and montage as techniques to reach the same objective. In turn, the film serves as a potential template for production or analytical assignments: imitating Proctor's techniques could reveal the ways women are filmed in kitchens, for instance, or men playing sports.

Proctor's revision of visual patterns in media resonates with Catherine Grant's discussion of the ways feminist scholars use the video essay form. In addition to critiquing problematic images verbally or in writing, feminist video essayists "play with their reproduction, reframing and reformulating from the inside of the media forms themselves" ("Feminist Videographic Criticism"). Although "remix" fails to adequately describe the film, Katherine Groo's definition of the term is useful: "a metahistorical work, a mode of historical expression that is fundamentally *about* film artefacts and historical retelling" ("Cut, Paste"). As in *A Movie By Jen Proctor*, Proctor discloses a cinephilic fascination with her chosen films and produces an "historical retelling" of women in cinema. But "revision" or "re-vision" (the latter invoking Adrienne Rich) more accurately reflects the ideological process at work in *Soap and Water* and Proctor's resistance to problematic representations of women onscreen. [6] Proctor's historical revision does not presume that all of the films she appropriates are harmful to women, but it does ask pedagogically-oriented questions intended to fuel critical thinking—for instance, why do cameras linger on women's shoulders? When and why do films show fragmented body parts, and which ones?



<p>This shot demonstrates the fragmentation of the female body, particularly during scenes of violence.</p>	<p>Like the shots of women undressing, the hand on the lip of the bathtub isolates feminine-coded gestures and body parts.</p>
	
<p>Shot from above, this bather's torso and face are not fragmented as they are in earlier scenes, emphasizing the spectacle of her dead body.</p>	<p>Also shot from above, this bather's body is presented as a spectacle of death, while her presumed murderer reacts to the scene in the lower half of the frame.</p>
	
<p>This close-up on a bather's navel presents a different kind of spectacle—that of fragmentation and fetishizing minor aspects of the female body</p>	<p>Shot through the water, this close-up on a bather's navel matches the previous one and further reveals common framing and mise-en-scène patterns that fragment women's bodies.</p>

With *Soap and Water*, Proctor takes on a similar task as Laura Mulvey does in a short remix of a 30-second clip from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), slowing the scene, pausing it, and progressing frame-by-frame (consciously reminiscent of Martin Arnold's Hollywood found-footage films and Conner's *Marilyn Times Five* [1973]). [7] The result guides the viewer to reflect on the spectacle of Marilyn Monroe's gestures in intimate detail with Mulvey's guidance but no explicit argument intended to persuade the viewer. A similar project could be envisioned for a multitude of other scenes.

	
<p>In this remix of <i>Gentlemen Prefer Blondes</i>, Laura Mulvey slows and freezes the frame to reveal Marilyn Monroe's gestures.</p>	<p>Mulvey freezes this frame, allowing the viewer to contemplate the spectacle of Monroe's stance—her isolation in the frame, her open mouth, closed eyes, and hands splayed over her chest</p>

In her pedagogic scholarship, furthermore, Proctor writes specifically about the advantages of using video essays in coursework to guide students through analyzing film texts. In her upper-level Film and Feminisms course, for instance, she asks students to analyze a scene from *Vertigo* (1958) through Mulvey's "Visual



In this video essay project for Proctor's *Film and Feminisms* course, the student analyzes the male gaze in *Vertigo* using specific frame grabs from the film.



The frame grabs allow students to freeze gestures and analyze their meaning. This image also exhibits the making of the project with Mozilla's Popcorn Maker.

Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" using Popcorn Maker. [8] The writing portion is minimal, but the results, Proctor writes, "[are], on the whole, richer, more precise, and more demonstrative than similar traditional essays" ("Video Essay"). Proctor finds that the multimedia creative process is especially effective in leading students to engage productively with theory. Although *Soap and Water* is not a video essay, its pedagogic structure and potential reflects the similar process through which Proctor leads her students to reading visual images alongside feminist film theory.

*Soap and Water* therefore reflects the lineage of feminist film theory in several ways, above all in its attention to the representation of women (and their bodies) onscreen. The bathtub space is perhaps even more intimate than the bedroom; in the bathtub, the women's explicit or implied nudity displays their vulnerability and reinforces their onscreen passivity. The film's representation of physical violence against the female body is especially prevalent, and Proctor's strategy to linger on how the camera frames and fragments women's bodies evinces the violence of voyeurism. While feminist scholars have criticized Hollywood cinema for fragmenting women's bodies through close-ups and thereby reducing them to objects, feminist avant-garde filmmakers such as Carolee Schneemann and Peggy Ahwesh use fragmentation as a subversive practice, disorienting the spectator and frustrating the pleasure of the female body as spectacle. In *Soap and Water*, Proctor brings the two together, demonstrating how popular media fragments and frames women's bodies and removing them from their original context in disorienting ways.

In this way, *Soap and Water* recalls the history of feminist avant-garde filmmakers, who by the 1980s consciously worked toward making feminist visual language deliberate and explicit, rather than implicitly weaving in their political objectives (Rich, *Chick Flicks* 283). Like Lucy Fischer writes of many feminist filmmakers in *Shot/Countershot*, Proctor is "not only alluding to male-authored films but recycling them for her own aesthetic/ideological purpose" (Rich, "Feminist Film Criticism" 14)—and, I would add, pedagogical. Crucially, the source material for *Soap and Water* is not only male-authored, and excerpts from *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985) and *The Babadook* (2014), for instance, suggest that female viewers also internalize (and may or may not resist) familiar images of women. With *Soap and Water*, furthermore, Proctor once again takes her cues from Conner. She appropriates visual language from film texts and, through montage, reappropriates this visual language with a feminist objective: to make explicit how women's bodies are visually recycled in mainstream narrative films. In turn, Proctor poses a pedagogical challenge for the viewer to pay attention to these tropes elsewhere and to consider how visual media reproduce images of women for passive consumption.



In *Soap and Water*, Proctor isolates brief sequences in order to lead viewers to particular patterns of viewing and analysis.



In this shot, *Soap and Water* reveals the voyeuristic framing of recycled gestures, stances, and fragments on women's bodies



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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



In his figure-less film *Blue*, Derek Jarman uses a blue background and privileges the voices that comprise the film's contemplative tone.



While *Blue* depicts the shade of blue that Jarman was primarily able to see at the end of his life, Proctor's pink background in *Am I Pretty?* makes gendered associations with girlhood and femininity.



While the color in *Blue* is stable and solid, in *Am I Pretty?* it features a mild cloud pattern and gradually darkens to purple.

## *Am I Pretty?*

While *Soap and Water* holds an overt pedagogical function, *Am I Pretty?* is a far more challenging film that confronts issues of misogyny and gendered violence beyond cinematic representation. Proctor's subject in this film is a trend in which girls and teens post videos of themselves to YouTube, imploring viewers to "rate" their attractiveness in the comments section. This genre emerged around 2009, but it was popularized and drew critical attention around 2012-2014, and many such examples are available on YouTube and other video-sharing sites.[8b] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] Like *Soap and Water*, *Am I Pretty?* is organized thematically and by repetition; through Proctor's careful juxtaposition, it demonstrates a narrative of sorts that represents the trajectory of the "am I pretty?" genre, underscoring certain phrases used repeatedly by different girls. The girls are never visible in the film. Instead, Proctor replaces their images with a background that fades slowly from light pink to dark purple, consciously evoking Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993).

As I will show, Proctor combines excerpts in which girls describe aspects of their physical appearance with ones in which they discuss their lives or relationships with family and friends, thus highlighting their similarities and differences and the range of their vocal inflections. Because the footage is manipulated to privilege sound, Proctor asks the spectator to reconsider what satisfies the requirements of a "film" [9]. At the same time, the visual element—as in *Blue*—ensures that *Am I Pretty?* belongs to the cinematic medium. It is, as Vivian Sobchack writes of *Blue*, "not image-less. Rather, it is figure-less" (197). The source material of *Am I Pretty?* serves an ethnographic purpose in certain ways, but Proctor avoids exploiting her subjects and thereby—as Catherine Russell writes of some of her predecessors in feminist avant-garde filmmaking—"consistently challenges all forms of objective representation" ("Culture as Fiction" 357). The film's pedagogical structure is traceable in its separation between voice and visible body.

The first speaker begins: "You all know who I am, well—maybe you don't, so, my name's Shelby." Proctor then edits together several other girls greeting their audience ("hey guys, it's Bailey," "hi, I'm Brittney," and so on) in a chorus-like opening. Next come two longer excerpts, both of them expositional, that preface each girl's reason for making the video in the first place—mostly being bullied at school or by family and friends. The first says, "most of the guys at my school ... say I'm a slut and a ho and a bitch and a whore. I'm *not* any of those things ... say what you think of me, but it's *not* gonna hurt my feelings." Several shorter excerpts follow in which girls implore viewers and subscribers to respond to the question at hand—"am I pretty?"—in the YouTube comments section. Many girls specify that their friends call them pretty, but that their peers call them ugly; one girl believes her friends are "just trying to be nice" and therefore cannot honestly judge her appearance. Another mentions that her "self-esteem is at an all-time low" and she is turning to the Internet for an honest assessment; she begins to describe herself, calling her hair "a wreck" and saying that her friends tell her she isn't fat "even though, like, look at me, I'm practically a whale." Many girls similarly focus on particular aspects of their appearance and individual body parts—their teeth, their hair, their smile, their forehead, their makeup, their skin tone, and so on. One girl, after expounding on her numerous perceived flaws, adds, "but you know, I'm kind of happy and I'm very confident about who I am, so I really don't care what anyone thinks of me." The film's final excerpt follows a similar trajectory to many of the others—a girl says that she has been bullied, describes her appearance in the eyes of her peers and friends (ugly, pretty, "a nerd"),



The colors in *Am I Pretty?* are vibrant and dynamic, while the spectrum of pink to purple evokes the range of colors associated with girlhood in particular.



The absence of the original videos in *Am I Pretty?* gives a contemplative quality to the gradual change from pink to purple.



The changing color palette reminds viewers that *Am I Pretty?* is meant to be seen; it is not primarily an audio project.



*Am I Pretty?* ends on a dark purple hue before fading to black. The dark shades contrast the

expresses curiosity at the Internet's honest assessment of her, and ends by adding, "but in all honesty I think I am beautiful. I really think I'm beautiful." The film ends on this note and fades from dark purple to black.

For Sarah Banet-Weiser, the "am I pretty?" videos are a genre that represent the contradictory place where girls in the digital age—particularly white, middle-class girls—find themselves: between the feminist rhetoric of female empowerment or self-validation and the reactionary messages they continue to receive from a culture that objectifies women and cultivates a narrow definition of beauty. The "am I pretty?" videos demonstrate "the labor [girls] require to conquer low self-esteem" (Banet-Weiser 90) and thereby reveal the genre's roots in a conflation of postfeminism and the self-help trends that took off beginning in the 1970s. Banet-Weiser disparages the tendency to criticize the girls for seeking attention, arguing that such a move obscures the political, social, and cultural problems that regulate and scrutinize women's bodies, therefore "placing the burden of the vulnerable body right back onto her" (97). The problems of self-esteem that manifest themselves in these videos serve to as a reminder that self-confidence and empowerment continues to hinge on appearance. Per Banet-Weiser, girls who make "am I pretty?" videos do so in order to claim a place for themselves in society that appears available to them only if they are attractive.

The goal of *Am I Pretty?* is largely in line with Banet-Weiser's move to eradicate the girls from blame and to acknowledge the dominant ideology and internalized gendered violence that enabled these videos in the first place. Proctor was drawn to the idea of using the "am I pretty or ugly?" genre in a film, but struggled to formulate the project until she was invited to participate on a conference panel about imageless films. As Jaimie Baron has noted, found-footage filmmaking can pose an ethical dilemma, especially when the source material is personal ("Ethics of Appropriation" 157-8). The idea of using the girls' images struck Proctor as problematic even though they were readily available on the Internet. This hesitation led her to frustrate the core intention of the videos—for viewers to rate the girls' appearance—by obscuring their videos entirely, thereby minimizing the likelihood of exploiting her subjects.

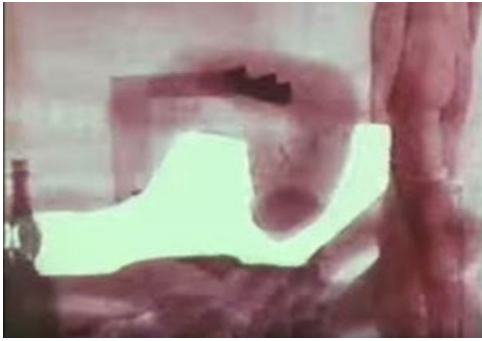
Naomi Uman's *Removed* (1999), another feminist avant-garde film that hinges on the absence of its female subject, is a crucial influence for Proctor. In *Removed*, Uman manipulates a pornographic film by removing the woman's body from the film strip, with the effect of "[robbing] the cinematic image of its phantasmic ability to maintain the figure of the woman's body as a substitute for her exclusion" (Eliaz 227). In *Am I Pretty?*, Proctor similarly contradicts the purpose of the videos by transforming the subservient element in the source material—the voice—into the dominant one and manipulating the footage to draw attention to how female representation changes when the image is absent. Sound studies scholar Jackie Cook notes the paradox that "listening, among the earliest of the human communicative senses to develop, is culturally among the last to be taken seriously," [10] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] even as it "is an active, discriminating, critical, evaluative act" (42). In *Am I Pretty?* Proctor concretizes many of these activities, challenging her viewers to consider how including the visual element would change the experience of the film.

The voices in *Am I Pretty?* function as what Michel Chion terms the "complete acousmètre" (21), or a voice whose source remains visually obscured. A film produces different effects depending on the relation of voice and body, but the lack of either voice or body invites spectators (or listeners) to visualize the body or imagine the voice. Chion writes,

"Voices in silent film, because they are implied, are dreamed voices ... Garbo in the silent era had as many voices as all of her admirers individually conferred on her" (8).



film's hopeful ending note.



In *Removed*, Naomi Uman uses bleach to remove the woman from a pornographic filmstrip. Her absence renders the actions surreal and absurd.



The woman's presence in *Removed* is made more palpable through her absence and the intact male figures in the film.



In *The Color of Love*, Peggy Ahwesh distorts a found-footage pornographic film to critique women's representation in pornography.

Here, Chion is speaking of a specific experience of entertainment and particularly fandom, in which film spectators or radio enthusiasts fill in the missing element—voice or body—of their favorite performers. While individual viewers of *Am I Pretty?* will imagine different bodies and faces for their girls' voices they hear, the relationship between spectator and subject differs vastly from that of Chion's description. The girls are unknown vloggers or YouTubers, not movie or radio stars, and their bodies and faces are not “dreamed” in the same way. “Dreaming” or imagining the girls' physical appearance in *Am I Pretty?*, instead, poses an exercise in discomfort for the viewer.

Proctor's decision to subvert the focus of the videos from visual to aural evidences the legacies of psychoanalytic feminist film theory. As Mary Ann Doane, Kaja Silverman, and Trinh T. Minh-ha have separately noted, the voiceover has tended — in documentary filmmaking above all—to be male, and to represent a voice of authority, “attesting to an achieved invisibility, omniscience, and discursive power” (Silverman 312) [11]. Furthermore, *Am I Pretty?* calls to mind the long lineage of experimental feminist filmmaking and its tendency to disrupt or frustrate the viewer's gaze in order to critique it or offer an alternative to the portrayal of women in dominant cinema. Silverman names a handful of films—such as Marjorie Keller's *Misconception* (1977), Chantal Akerman's *News From Home* (1977), and Yvonne Rainer's *Journeys From Berlin/71* (1980) — that, through their fragmentation, separation, or disruption between the female voice and image, liberate the voice

“from its obsessive and indeed exclusive reference to the female body, a reference which turns woman—in representation and in fact—back upon herself, in a negative and finally self-consuming narcissism” (315).

The task, for many female avant-garde filmmakers, has been to reclaim a feminine voice that is not “denied the authority of creativity, restrained by her inescapable embodiment” (Greer 153). The political implications of Proctor as a female experimental filmmaker are important here: she separates the voices from their embodied images, but the voices are largely devoted to describing their embodiment, even as they ask the viewer to consider the individual identities of each girl. Rather than allow the girls' images to “speak,” the film demands that spectators listen to their voices. In her revision of the original texts, their words — and, in turn, their personalities—become central and bestow an agency upon the girls that does not depend on visual judgment from the spectator.

As Pooja Rangan points out, however, the idea of “giving a voice” to marginalized or vulnerable people is a fraught solution to the need for diverse representation in media. Referring to radio scholar Frances Dyson, who demonstrates that the embodied markers of age, race, gender, and ability can be identifiable in the voice and undermine authority, Rangan writes,

“For marginal social subjects, therefore, having a voice — that is, evidencing their humanity — inevitably involves losing something that matters: the embodied position they allegedly speak for” (103).

Rangan advocates instead for the possibilities of experimenting with voicelessness, citing Leslie Thornton's films as examples. Thornton's innovative use of sound, Rangan argues, “[brings] our attention to the violence as well as the potential of the voice as a vexed site of interpellative contact” (109). While viewers might similarly be able to discern identifying markers among the voices featured in *Am I Pretty?*, Proctor's editing highlights above all what they have in common — disposition, level of confidence, and subject matter, thus relieving the focus from any one girl in particular. While Rangan and Dyson are primarily concerned with internalized bias against marginalized voices assuming authority, the girls in *Am I Pretty?* do not assume authority or speak with the intent of “claiming” their voice. Their relationship to authority is more complex: they instead relinquish



In *News From Home*, Chantal Akerman reads her mother's letters from Belgium aloud over city-scenes of New York, creating a disjuncture between the sound and image.

authority to the commentators who will judge their appearance (“do you think I’m pretty?”), even as they resist negative judgment (“I really think I’m beautiful”).

Proctor’s chosen excerpts reveal patterns in the verbal violence that teens and young women face from their (especially male) peers and family, while the comments sections of the videos themselves are rife with vicious insults. The comments are often so brutal that the videos are removed or the comments section is disabled. A 2014 *New York Times* article quotes Sammie, a thirteen-year-old who found it difficult to return to her video afterward because, as she recalls, “There are people telling me to kill myself” in the comments section (Quenqua). Sammie initially made the video because “People at my school and camp say I’m the most ugliest person they’ve ever seen” (Quenqua). The “am I pretty?” video genre calls attention to how misogynistic violence circulates online and offline.

As Karen Lumsden and Heather M. Morgan argue, “violence against women in the digital realm reinforces established gender roles (as they emerge in offline spaces)” (123). They use Pierre Bourdieu and Loic J.D. Wacquant’s theory of “symbolic violence” in regard to online abuse, which—they argue—is another way to perpetrate gendered violence and render victims complicit in their own oppression. *Am I Pretty?*, however, does not aim to criticize the teens or even to lament the “am I pretty?” genre. Rather, it explores the videos’ complexity as artifacts of the girls’ free-spirited self-expression within the bonds of societal scrutiny and mediated through popular technology. Like *Soap and Water*, Proctor uses repetition here to pose questions about the ways in which gendered violence manifests itself in online spaces, as well as the girls’ positions as speaking subjects. Importantly, Proctor does not include any reference throughout the film to the comments sections from the original videos, ensuring that the film’s focus is on the girls’ voices and not on the broader conditions of their circulation.

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### Conclusion: “haunted” films

In an interview with William C. Wees, Abigail Child discusses the influence of television on avant-garde filmmakers born after WWII, explaining:

“In the ‘70s a lot of us were seeing structural film, and yet we were coming from this TV background. Now what I think a lot of us are doing: we’re using emotional images, images that mean something to us, powerful, resonant images—not taking just anything, but being attentive to what images say and mean and how they can be read, actually approaching the flow of image-meaning, representation—and then rolling those representative images into structures that might share more formalist ideas.” (*Recycled Images* 71)

Feminist film criticism and avant-garde filmmaking are among various critical and creative legacies evident in Proctor’s creative work, while the influence of popular culture—now including digital media in addition to film and television—is palpable throughout *Nothing a Little Soap and Water Can’t Fix*, *Am I Pretty?*, and her pedagogical investments. Of the various uses filmmakers have discovered for archival or other found-footage materials, Wees identifies montage/collage as having “the greatest potential to criticize, challenge, and possibly subvert the power of images produced by, and distributed through, the corporate media” (*Recycled Images* 33). *Soap and Water* and *Am I Pretty?* substantiate this potential, even as—in the case of the latter film—Proctor demonstrates that removing images altogether is a powerful and productive possibility for critiquing the power of images and media.

In the introduction to her edited collection on experimental women filmmakers, Robin Blaetz argues that female avant-garde filmmakers have long worked in the spirit of Claire Johnston’s seminal call for “counter-cinema” by creating a “new language” (to evoke Rich) specific to women’s modes of seeing (5). In these two films, Proctor does not create a new visual language as much as she breaks down existing ones into discernible and analyzable parts. Rather than being overwhelming or obscure, her films’ clarity and didacticism allows spectators to become aware of the structures of cinematic representation and symbolic violence in digital and offline spaces. While Proctor’s films can be viewed autonomously, they are always “haunted by the original” material (MacDonald 89).

The idea of Proctor’s films as “haunted” provides a useful comparison to the relationship between original material and repurposed material in the final product for *Soap and Water* and *Am I Pretty?* In many ways, the original material is not locatable in either film. *Soap and Water* does not engage with just one text, but with a concept that spans numerous films. Alongside the film’s critical foundation, the rapid succession of film clips invites a cinephilic guessing game—how many films can you recognize? Most viewers will not have seen all the films, or be able to recall which ones they have seen, although they may recognize actresses or discern time periods. In turn, the original sources compiled for *Am I Pretty?* are intentionally not locatable, as Proctor’s removal of the visual footage calls attention to the implicit patterns of gendered violence in online media without identifying its subjects or their critics.

Both films align with Proctor’s aim to open conversation in the classroom. She does not seek to punish the viewer, but rather to encourage reflection on dominant images through repetitive juxtaposition that is visually and





*What Happened to Her* juxtaposes scenes of dead women in narrative film to reveal visual patterns between them. As in *Soap and Water*, the dead woman's body is presented here as a spectacle.



A close-up of a corpse's feet in *What Happened to Her* demonstrates a similar tendency to fragment the dead female body. The voiceover reminds the viewer that the bodies are, in fact, actors "acting" dead.



The podcast *My Favorite Murder* poses a similar ethical dilemma to *Am I Pretty?* by inviting listeners to imagine violence against women's bodies without a visual aid representation.

intellectually appealing, both from a cinephilic and aesthetic standpoint. In addition to being "haunted" by the original material, the films reveal connections that cannot be made without putting multiple original texts in dialogue, and with the end goal of reconsidering—or "re-viewing"—familiar texts and tropes initially created for entertainment through a pedagogical lens that reveals the gendered ideology implicit in those texts.

To conclude, I will briefly move away from Proctor's films to discuss how her work reflects broader trends in feminist filmmaking and audio work, particularly in regard to gendered violence. *Soap and Water* is visually similar to Kristy Guevara-Flanagan's short documentary *What Happened to Her* (2016), "a forensic exploration of our cultural obsession with images of the dead woman on screen" (Women Make Movies). Like *Soap and Water*, *What Happened to Her* edits together appropriated footage from popular television and film of murdered women. By removing them from their original context and juxtaposing them side-by-side, they challenge their passive inclusion—and the fascination they are meant to provide—from their original material.

*What Happened to Her* deviates from *Soap and Water*, however, by offering an accompanying voiceover from actress Danyi Deats as she recounts playing a dead woman. The experience that she describes—being nude in front of a largely male crew, being asked to "play dead" in water, or otherwise being placed in physically demanding conditions, all while remaining completely still—is juxtaposed by corresponding images of dozens of such images in various films. Deats' experience is represented through the horrific images of violence against women, and the images are placed to remind viewers that the bodies are, in reality, living actresses playing dead. The effect is similar to that of *Soap and Water*—scenes are carefully chosen to demonstrate the repetition of such images in popular media—but the voiceover carries out a distinctly subjective point of view, thereby articulating its objectives in ways that *Soap and Water* does not. The lack of voiceover or accompanying text in *Soap and Water* evinces Proctor's focus on process as a conversation between maker and viewer—or teacher and student.

*Am I Pretty?* poses similar ethical questions as Georgia Hardstark and Karen Kilgariff's true crime podcast *My Favorite Murder* (2016-present). In each episode, Hardstark and Kilgariff relate the backstory, circumstances, and gory details of a different murder, many with a female victim. Notably, the podcast has a particularly large following of women listeners. While the nonfiction podcast genre offers a reversal of the authority usually ascribed to the male in nonfiction film, Amanda Greer argues that *My Favorite Murder* in particular

"[counters] crime film and television's reliance on images of degraded, violated and assaulted female bodies with purely aural recountings ... [forcing] listeners to imaginatively reconstruct scenes of female-directed violence, while acknowledging the ethics of their complicity in the propagation and popularization of these narratives" (153).

This process, Greer argues, implicates listeners in imagining the violence, while images do not. Both *My Favorite Murder* and *Am I Pretty?* invite the viewer (especially the female viewer) to reflect on the fascinations they might hold with spectacles of physical and symbolic violence, while considering the ethical problems or representational limitations of privileging visual or sonic dimensions. The ubiquity of video editing software, digital video-sharing, and criticism in online spaces functions, in many ways, as different modes of expression for feminist critics and artists. Proctor's films clearly emerge from feminist analytical and avant-garde traditions and point, in turn, to their future: a burgeoning creative tradition of female consumers-turned critics who use diverse audiovisual techniques to re-view and lead their viewers to identify and critique gendered violence in the media and elsewhere.

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The interactive format of *Troubling Your Horizons* (2014) invites the viewer to co-author the film and allows for numerous narrative directions.



In *Spline Describing a Phone* (2012), Proctor makes recourse to Anthony McCall's *Line Describing a Cone*, "remaking" and re-viewing the older piece with new technology—much as she does with *A Movie*.



In another found-footage film, *Scream* (2014), Proctor emulates Martin Arnold's use of repetition and anticipates her juxtaposition of film sequences in *Soap and Water* to analyze and

## Interview with Jennifer Proctor

By Sonia Lupher

I first saw *Nothing a Little Soap and Water Can't Fix* at the 2017 Ax Wound Film Festival in Vermont, which showcases horror films written and directed by women. I conducted this interview for a broader project on the history of women working in horror film production, and therefore the focus of the interview is on *Soap and Water* and the horror genre. Proctor addressed the questions on *Am I Pretty?* later and were not part of the original interview.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

**Tell me about your work. What kinds of themes and projects do you tend to gravitate toward?**

My work these days largely focuses on working with found footage, whether from popular media or from the web. I find the process of recontextualizing existing work a fascinating process of analysis and puzzle-solving that also reveals latent meanings and serves as a resistant form of critique. Essentially, it's detournement, which is nothing new, but still a process I find relevant and useful. Before working with found footage, I spent a lot of time shooting 16mm and Super 8 film to create more personal/nonfiction/poetic work, but I've discovered I don't enjoy such introspection in the creative process—I'm more inclined toward looking to the outside and discovering my own relationship with existing material.

I've also worked a bit with video installation and interactive documentary, and the doc work does get a bit more personal, but the interactive format allows for an element of randomness and play that I find similar to working with found footage—there are parameters within which the maker (and viewer) have to work to create the viewing experience. (I'm mainly thinking about my piece *Troubling Your Horizons* here, which focuses on my family on a sailboat.)

Part of what I've done with found footage is explore the notion of experimental film remake, or, perhaps, "covers" of experimental films. *A Movie by Jen Proctor* (2010) remakes Bruce Conner's 1958 *A Movie* using YouTube videos instead of newsreels and novelty films as a means of taking stock of the contemporary media landscape, while also drawing attention to what has change in our media images since 1958, and what has remained stubbornly the same. *Spline Describing a Phone* (2012) is a remake of a larger, 16mm-based installation/performance by Anthony McCall, but miniaturized and digitized using a pico projector and iPhone (or iPod Touch). Again, it draws out the materiality of the different technological apparatuses as a means for exploring the historical moments in which each was produced, and bringing into relief all that has occurred between them.

**What or who are some of your biggest influences as a creator?**

My work is largely influenced by experimental work, which is obviously a mode I love. Looking to found footage work, which I've mostly focused on lately, I would have to cite Matthias Muller, Naomi Uman, Christian Marclay, and Craig Baldwin as some key figures. Lori Felker, Jesse McLean, and Jennifer Reeder are also contemporary filmmakers whose work pushes boundaries that I really love and



deconstruct the minute sounds and gestures of women screaming in narrative film.



A close-up on a woman's mouth in *Scream* reveals another instance of fragmenting the female body.



In *Groundless* (2010), Proctor edits together airplane sequences, drawing attention through deconstruction to the actions and framings used frequently in such scenes.



Proctor's *Surfacing* (2003) is a handmade documentary and self-portrait, in which the blurring of the film strip matches that of her image.

with critical and feminist perspectives. But my major influence is probably teaching—the process of deconstructing film texts for students, and with students, and learning from their points of view, is often what feeds my work. It's where many of my ideas spring from. Being immersed in critical and creative dialogues about film all the time, especially with fresh minds, can't help but inspire new ways of thinking and making.

**What is it about the experimental mode that makes it so important for you as an artist?**

Well, to be honest, I find making narrative films boring! I love watching narrative films, but I find the process of making them decidedly uninteresting. Experimental work opens up new ways of thinking, new ways of expressing, and new ways of drawing attention, in my work, to elements of conventional or narrative media that you could accomplish in other forms of making. The experimental approach allows for appropriation and detournement of existing works, which is what I love—I love digging into what other people have done and recontextualizing it to demonstrate hidden truths or formulae or aesthetics. I couldn't do that in any other form.

**When and how did the idea for *Nothing a Little Soap and Water Can't Fix* come to you, and how did you choose the excerpts? Why did you choose to focus on the filmed activity of women bathing—rather than, for example, dancing, getting dressed, or other activities?**

The idea came from excavating material for another film that never came to fruition, but as I was capturing footage for that film, I noticed the wide range of women in bathtubs, and all the different functions the bathtub served, from providing a space for women to explore their own interiority—a safe space—to, of course, becoming a place of entrapment and violence. It seems to sum up the limitations of the representation of women (namely white women) on film, where the safest spaces could also become suspect. The bathtub, and bathrooms in general, are particularly coded as feminine in cinema, and they represent one of the few space in the domestic home where women can find solitude or rest or sexual gratification without the demands of the rest of the family. It's a place where they let their guard down, where they're literally nude and have no protection, but there's also no escape from these spaces, so it's also where any kind of villain knows a woman is most vulnerable and therefore easiest to attack. So the film is in many ways an examination and critique of that space and how it's used in cinematic representation, which accomplishes a wide range of meanings that we don't see in other spaces in movies.

**What struck me about the film is that it has a clear thematic narrative in terms of the excerpts you chose. They are well-timed and well-placed, and it was very illuminating to see eerie similarities between shots and angles. Since you've familiarized yourself with so many films for this project, what did you notice about the different ways in which women and men are filmed while bathing? What were some other revelations that came to you during the process?**

Oh yes—these elements are among the most fascinating. For one, we see the faces of several women framed through their legs in these scenes, which we would never see of a man unless it were played for comedy. It's both a highly sexualized shot and one that reinforces just how vulnerable the women are—it's highly voyeuristic. Of course, there're also bubble baths—we never see men in bubble baths unless a woman is there also. And we see (again white) women with candles and wine, which suggests that this kind of self-care is a fairly privileged thing to do, a romantic thing to do, and even kind of a ritualistic thing to do. Even a scene in which a girl commits suicide in the bathtub involves her setting up candles around the bath. This notion of self-care becomes coded as feminine (we would never see a man in a tub with candles and wine) and even something indulgent for

which women are ultimately punished when an attack inevitably occurs.

In general, we rarely see men in baths in film unless it's for a secondary purpose—a man is in a cold or iced bath because of some kind of physical trauma, or he's being drowned there, and thus is usually clothed. He's generally never alone—either he's with a woman or he's under attack. Things change when we consider TV representations of men and women, but in film these representations are much more limited. We see men in showers, sure, but that's utilitarian—he's never soaking in water to relax. And it's interesting that while we'll see shots of men in showers that emphasize their physique, or emphasize a feminine gaze, he's *active* in the shower, standing up and doing the work of cleaning himself. Women in bathtubs, on the other hand, are usually prone and passive with their bodies on display.

***Nothing a Little Soap and Water Can't Fix* also shows an interest in the horror genre, and horror-coded patterns of looking. I'm curious to hear about how you were first drawn to the genre, and through what medium/media.**

I was a deeply, deeply scared little kid who suffered from night terrors. I spent many nights with the light on and the radio going, reading until I couldn't possibly keep my eyes open anymore, because I was so afraid to go to sleep. Even the lightest scary movie terrified me—*Ghostbusters* (1984) had me up for days, even though I loved the movie. But I was always fascinated by the idea of ghosts, and still am.

So, I don't know if that childhood experience inflected my later gravitation to horror, but now it's my absolute favorite genre. Maybe I enjoy it now partly because it gives me space to be scared safely, which I didn't have as a kid, so there's a kind of catharsis to watching it (which there always is, regardless of your background). Now it's a thrill, and I love to be scared – only to come back to a place of stability, of course.

I suspect part of what also made me more open to horror after a traumatic childhood was learning about the filmmaking process, which started when I was a teen. I gorged on every moviemaking book and magazine I could get my hands on, and I remember being fascinated by the way George Romero films and other B-horror movies were made, with fake blood and pig intestines for zombies to munch on. Learning that helped de-mystify what was scary about horror films. And now, I love deconstructing them on all kinds of other levels, especially from a feminist theoretical perspective.

**Recently women-produced horror has been gaining a lot of visibility. Why do you think this is? And what do you think is drawing so many women to horror these days?**

Several studies have shown recently that horror film audiences are at least half women, which I think busts the myth that the horror genre is male-dominated. I don't know for certain all of the different elements that might drive women to horror, but the phenomenon of the final girl is one—horror films often feature strong women that overcome the monster, and we don't always see that in other genres. Horror films can also acknowledge the violence and threat that women experience in everyday life and give visibility to it. And, of course, I think a wide range of audiences take pleasure in horror because it allows that sensation of getting right up next to abjection in a safe way, and I would suggest that that kind of catharsis is appealing (much like melodrama, or other body genres, to draw on Linda Williams). I think women have a lot to say about horror and violence, because many of us feel a sense of threat on a regular basis! It's not unlike Jordan Peele addressing the constant threat of white supremacy for black people in *Get Out* (2017) via the horror/thriller genre.

More practically, it seems that horror can be an effective genre for women to

break into because it's notoriously low-budget, has built-in audiences and followings, and can be an effective way for women to prove themselves to a bro-culture. The barriers are comparatively low.

But there's a stubborn view that horror is masculine—that violence in movies is the realm of the male viewer, and that because these films are violent, female audiences won't be interested. Surrounding that is a pretty passionate culture of horror fans that have cultivated a community that can be rather exclusively male. So, although research doesn't bear out the idea that horror audiences are disproportionately masculine, in situations like this (see also video games), the perception that horror could be embraced by women becomes a threat to bro-culture, and one that is met with hostility. And that affects both female audiences and the ability for female directors to break into the genre. To be clear, I don't have specific data on the proportion of female horror directors specifically, but I don't think it's a leap to say they're few and far between. I can say that only 25% of the shorts filmmakers in film festivals in 2017 were women. That's pathetic. But then, another festival I'm screening in—a general festival, not even horror-related—is celebrating that it exceeded its goal of 40% women filmmakers. It's a sad state that a festival has to set a goal of achieving less than half women filmmakers.

### **Where do you see yourself fitting into the women in horror movement?**

Right now, I see myself fitting into this movement as someone drawing attention to existing formulae in films dealing with violence against women, and given that *Soap and Water* has received a fair amount of attention from film festivals, there seems to be a hunger for it. I don't think the film is saying anything we don't know, but it's providing the evidence for it in a visceral way that makes it harder to ignore. And, with the current climate of the #MeToo movement, this video becomes just another example of why change is needed. In many ways, I see myself as a critic more than anything—someone who can help enable change or contribute to the argument for why change is needed. I see myself as a supporter of makers with marginalized identities.

### **Moving to *Am I Pretty?*, many patterns manifest themselves, particularly in the things the girls say. Did you notice other patterns in the videos that you decided to leave out?**

In my first go-around of watching these videos, I was devastated—I found them heartbreaking as they repeated the same self-doubt over and over again. But the more I looked at them the more I saw the personalities of these young women come out, and come out with a certain freedom and confidence. They crack jokes, they make faces, the one girl breaks out into song, another girl goofs around with her iPod that won't stay upright, and so on. And I hope I capture a bit of that in this piece, which I tried to do. The patterns, then, are actually quite complex, a give-and-take for the young women between trying to understand their place within societal norms and a more naïve sense of not caring (or not being aware of) what the world thinks of them. And we see a lot more of that in the original videos too: lots of rambling, hamming it up for the camera, getting distracted while the camera's still rolling, etc. And, of course, this video leaves out their bedrooms, which are amazing and wonderful in their décor, and also deeply expressive of their personalities—much more so than you might get just from their voices here.

### **Did you ever consider incorporating the original images? How did you make the decision to leave them out, and how did you choose the visual background that we do get?**

I never really did consider including the original images. Mainly, even though these videos are public, ethically it didn't feel right to use the images of these girls in an appropriation work. So that's where it started from—I had known for a while that I wanted to do something with these videos but I didn't know how. Then I was invited to be on a panel [for SCMS 2017] about “imageless films,” those films



that are designed as films but don't have an image, per se, and that got me thinking that this could be the right piece. So the original version of this work features a solid pink screen with the audio over the top—the image doesn't change. I wanted to ask the audience to look, and to hear these voices entreating the audience to cast judgment, but then withhold the object of their judgment, and in doing so, raise questions about what it means to look and to evaluate beauty. It's a sort of call out to the complicity we are all involved in when gauging how well any of us achieve societal norms, and especially through the framing of media.

After getting some feedback, though, and noting how audiences stopped looking—they turned their eyes away to listen—and notes that audiences who did look sometimes felt they saw something in the image, I decided to ramp up the visuality of the piece slightly. So now the colors change—the pink becomes more purple at the end, a more complex color representation of gender—and there's a very slowly evolving texture underneath. It's my hope that in a theatrical setting the image will inspire a bit more thought about what it means to look, but not be able to see the thing that is demanding the gaze. I wanted to foreground the importance of spectatorship for this piece—it's not just an audio work. It's meant to be “seen.”

### **What is a project you'd love to make?**

This long-form documentary on spirit communication is one of them, and it would certainly tease out gender issues as well. One thing my research reveals is that women have often been considered to be better mediums, or closer to the spirit world (playing into the stereotype of women's intuition and emotionality, the history of women as witches, etc.). The film is still coming into focus for me, so I think my dream is for me to finally figure out what that is!

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### Notes

1. Quoted in the interview portion that accompanies this article. [[return to page 1](#)]

2. The terms “found” and “appropriated” are used interchangeably. Following Jaimie Baron’s distinction between the terms and Proctor’s discussions about her creative process, I prefer to refer to Proctor’s footage as “appropriated” because it better reflects the technological circumstances of how the footage was obtained, and the fact that Proctor faced self-imposed limitations by working with her chosen materials. About her film *A Movie By Jen Proctor*, she says: “One of the key differences in my process versus [Bruce] Conner’s is that he was working with images he had truly *found*; he worked with what he had. By comparison, I was searching an enormous database with nearly infinite options, and that introduced distressing ethical problems for me by making me more complicit in the footage I was using” (MacDonald 87). In other words, while Conner’s material was literally found—in analog archives—Proctor’s was selected based from the vast digital material she came across online.

3. Rainer is quoted in Lucy Fischer important book *Shot/Countershot: Film Tradition and Women’s Cinema*, which pairs Rainer’s and other female-directed films with earlier male-directed films in order to theorize how women “re-imagine” dominant, male-directed cinema; in many ways, Proctor builds on the dialogic tradition which Fischer introduces. [[return to page 2](#)]

4. Email with author, 18 September 2018.

5. The depth and rigor Proctor’s teaching and involvement in pedagogical discourse among her colleagues is impressive. She co-founded and is the principal investigator for EDIT Media (Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Teaching Media), a digital research initiative that seeks to address gender, racial, and other imbalances that affect production students or keep students from pursuing production. The website includes a thorough and thoughtful database of “inclusive syllabi, assignments, activities, and video clips and links to help instructors with implementing best practices.” (<https://www.editmedia.org/>) Proctor also maintains a robust Teaching Resources tab on her personal website, where she shares textbook and software recommendations, as well as syllabi and assignments for courses such as Introduction to Screen Studies, Audio Production, and Gender, Sexuality, & Power in Screen Studies. (<https://cargo.jenniferproctor.com/filter/Video/Teaching-Resources>) In 2013, she published the illustrated article “Teaching the Annotated Video Essay with Mozilla’s Popcorn Maker” in the Society for Cinema and Media Studies’ Teaching Dossier series, in which she details strategies for guiding students through dense film theory. (<http://jenniferproctor.com/teachingdossier/>)

6. In “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” Adrienne Rich defines “re-vision” as “the act of looking back of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” (18). For women, she argues, re-vision is “an act of survival ... it is part of [woman’s] refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society” (18).

7. Mulvey’s remix of this clip from *Gentleman Prefer Blondes* can be seen here:

<http://mediacommons.org/intransition/2017/03/12/feminist-approaches-videographic-criticism>

8. Popcorn Maker is now defunct on Mozilla, but Proctor provides a link on her general website to a version available through Internet Archive:

<https://archive.org/pop/>

8b. This trend has been widely criticized and commented upon in the media, for instance in this 2014 New York Times article, which describes the experiences of several young women who made these videos:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/03/fashion/am-i-pretty-videos-posed-to-the-internet-raise-questions.html>. [[return to page 3](#)]

9. Lippit writes: “If the flicker film defined for the structuralist filmmakers the zero degree of cinema, the reduction of all cinema to its absolute form—the alternation of differentiated frames—then is Jarman’s film, which eliminates the atomic unit of the film from its visual register, still a film?” (22)

10. Here, Cook recalls Michel Chion’s claim in *The Voice in Cinema* that “we most often relegate [hearing] to the limbo of the unnamed” (17). Sound, he explains, can stir sensations in the listener that he or she may not fully comprehend. [[return to page 3](#)]

11. Doane, *Femmes Fatales*; Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*; Trinh, “Mechanical Eye, Electronic Ear, and the Lure of Authenticity” in *When the Moon Waxes Red*.

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



In “trigger” videos, content creators manipulate novel materials to elicit “Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response” (ASMR) in viewers. “ASMRtist” P.P.O.M.O. mixes Pop Rocks with shaving cream and applies the crackling mixture to a sponge she holds up to the rubber ear of a binaural microphone.



ASMRtists sooth viewers in “personal attention” videos. They often address audiences under stress in corporate capitalism’s hypercompetitive environments. Joanne, of the YouTube channel Relax For A While ASMR, takes on the role of a mother encouraging her college student to take a break from studying. She pretends to touch her child’s face by stroking the camera lens.



## “ASMR” media and the attention economy’s crisis of care

by [Racheal Fest](#)

User-generated content (UGC) tagged for “ASMR” has proliferated on YouTube, Instagram, and elsewhere since at least 2009. Content creators—or “ASMRtists,” as many call themselves—use the tag to indicate an audiovisual text might produce for viewers a pleasurable bodily sensation they call “Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response.”[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] The first peer-reviewed social sciences study investigating ASMR defines the feeling as “a tingling, static-like sensation widely reported to spread across the skull and down the back of the neck.”[2] A self-described “ASMR community” of more than a million creators and viewers shares videos that use an astounding diversity of aural and ocular cues to “trigger” this haptic pleasure. ASMR’s acolytes assign varied functions to these videos, claiming they combat insomnia, calm anxiety, relieve stress, forge connections, and more. By 2015, brands such as Dove Chocolate, Ikea, Glenmorangie Whiskey, and others began to appropriate the community’s sensuous forms for advertising campaigns, fund market research into ASMR, and sponsor popular YouTube influencers.[3]

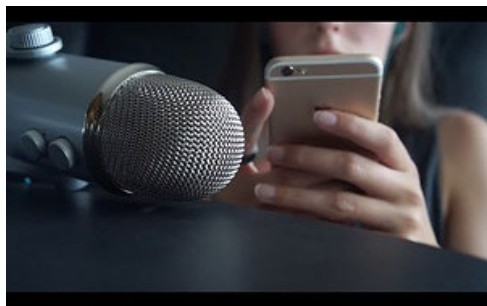
Since ASMR media’s emergence, scientists, journalists, and marketers have explained in different ways both the etiology of the sensation and the cultural practices the ASMR community has developed around it.[4] The sciences, and the community itself, most often endorse biological, psychological, and evolutionary explanations for ASMR media’s attractions and effects, arguing, for instance, that the sensation is an adaptation for bonding that specialists might deploy to treat a range of psychic ills.[5] Humanists, by contrast, have started to consider what historical conditions, particular to life in and beyond the West’s market democracies in the early twenty-first century, might animate ASMR media.[6]

From such an historical perspective, two global developments and their recent effects seem vital to ASMR media’s appearance and popularity. These videos first proliferated in the wake of the 2007-2008 financial crisis, which exacerbated economic inequality and initiated increased political instability across the globe.[7] Contemporaneously, mobile technologies appeared and multiplied, making perpetual labor possible for many and engendering a global economy of attention that generates capital by capturing eyes and ears, increasing screen-time, and amassing data.[8] These (and other) contemporary realities have established precarity and anxiety as the new millennium’s dominant structures of feeling, helping to produce even in the West’s elite centers what feminist critic Nancy Fraser has called a “crisis of care.”[9] Because imperatives for unfettered accumulation rule contemporary forms of economic organization and structure collective experience, Fraser argues, the time and energy we devote to “affective labor”—those activities of intimacy and care, necessary for collective life, the division of labor once assigned to women—have waned.[10]

We might understand ASMR media, at least in part, as an emergent attempt to ameliorate this crisis of care, and the attendant anxieties present economic, political, and social conditions produce, from inside the attention economy.



Some ASMR media adapt popular “self-care” discourses. Creators encourage viewers to love and care for themselves as a way to cope with personal, professional, and social challenges. Here, Layla (Trigger the Tingles) models pleasurable scalp scratching and hair parting. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HwGg4-zeWi8>

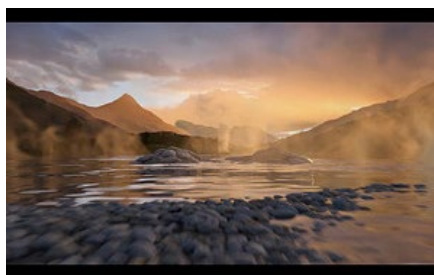


ASMR content often displays its dependence upon and fetishizes its engagement with mobile technologies and their cultures. J ASMR caresses her personal device, playing up its sonic and textural materiality. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gUf3d83bGMw>

ASMR media at once supplement and commoditize disappearing or outmoded forms of care-work, promising to fulfill those human needs and desires currently under pressure, even as they ensure viewers remain at the screen. To do so, ASMR media cultivate a range of common formal and generic strategies, three of which I describe and evaluate in this essay. I consider how videos tagged for “triggers,” “personal attention,” and “self-care” invent techniques and procedures that simultaneously make available and monetize new sources of affective labor.

When videos associated with each of these tags offer physiological, evolutionary, and therapeutic explanations to describe ASMR media’s aims and effects, I argue, they obscure the genre’s political and economic valences, naturalizing and rendering universal historical practices that emerge in response to particular contemporary conditions. In this way, ASMR media’s explanatory discourses help to shore up existing ways of thinking and the forms of collective organization these sanction, guaranteeing the conditions that reproduce for many a permanent state of crisis remain in place. ASMR media comfort us in a time of emergency, opening for viewers spectacular new modes of massively accessible love and care, but the community’s modes of self-presentation also foreclose critical thinking about how collectives might better remedy the broader crises ASMR media attempt to relieve through individualized digital interventions.

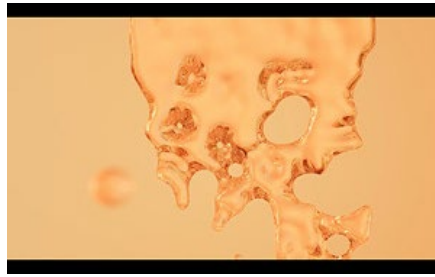
Scholars and critics have already noticed ASMR media promise viewers a reprieve from contemporary life’s many stresses by enlisting them in the brand of spectatorial labor upon which the economy of attention depends.[11] Although important work has tracked how YouTube and Reddit platforms, and their algorithms, contribute to ASMR content’s emergence, critics have only recently started to devote to ASMR texts the close, hermeneutic attention necessary to identify the specific forms and styles by which ASMRtists commoditize care and intimacy via these platforms,[13] and no critic has evaluated with YouTube’s political economy in mind the discourses of self-presentation the community circulates. This essay complements and extends existing work by cultivating that critical attention. It also contests, or at least raises questions about, recent claims that ASMR media cultivate “values antithetical to capital,” as Laura Jaramillo has argued.[14] If ASMR content “provid[es] the care that the exhausted bodies of late capitalism need in order to function,” as Jaramillo writes, I suggest it can do so thanks only to platforms, structures, and styles economic interests already over-determine.[15]



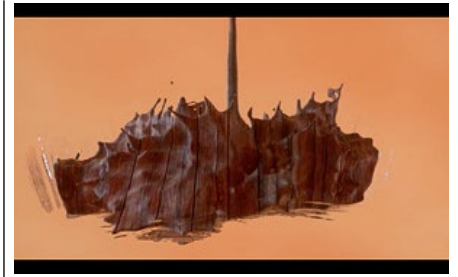
Glenmorangie Whiskey funded social sciences research with market applications and commissioned a series of online advertisements inspired by the study’s findings (See Barratt, Spence, and Davis).



“Journey into The Original” invites viewers to “feel the taste of Glenmorangie online.”



The promotional film scores natural images and abstract shapes with layered sounds and swelling violin.



It represents whiskey's genesis and claims to reproduce audio-visually its smell and savor.

## “Triggers”: commodities extend our bodies

For traditions of new media scholarship Marshall McLuhan's foundational texts inspire, a “medium” is an “extension of ourselves,” a technology, in other words, that extends human senses and faculties.[16] Understood in this way, ASMR media prompt us to recognize contemporary audiovisual technologies have already extended more than our capacities to see and hear. They have also extended our haptic capabilities, allowing us to touch each other, or at least to elicit in others some of the same sensations touch stimulates, across nearly boundless temporal and spatial distances. All ASMR media, by definition, make use of audiovisual recording equipment to generate for viewers distant in time and space a physiological impression comparable to touch.[17]



Water Whispers Ilse and a friend try out “17 Different ASMR Triggers.”



They coax noise from cardboard, salt, paper, and cloth.



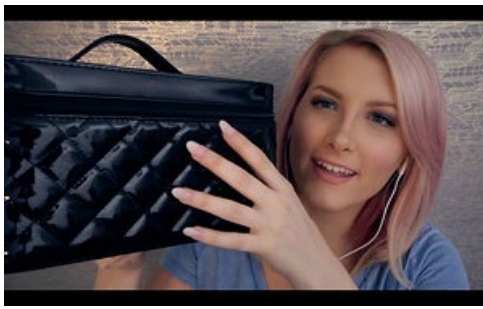
They don't speak or address the camera.



The video exemplifies how ASMRtists engage with objects in ways that seem to exceed their familiar utile, economic, and social values.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v55uXKh\\_j3g&t=976s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v55uXKh_j3g&t=976s)

ASMR media's purest genre promises just this. In videos tagged and titled for “triggers” or “trigger tests,” ASMRtists make sounds or trace before the camera hand movements they hope will incite in viewers “the tingles.” They do so most often by manipulating different objects or substances; the genre showcases a dazzling stable of aural and visual titillations. In some videos, artists play with household articles (tongs, wire, sponges), garbage (cellophane, cardboard, paper),





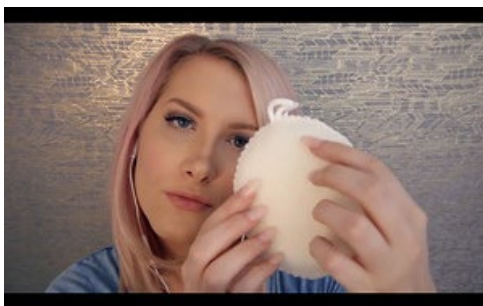
Trigger videos at once break with and reproduce marketing's sensuous protocols.



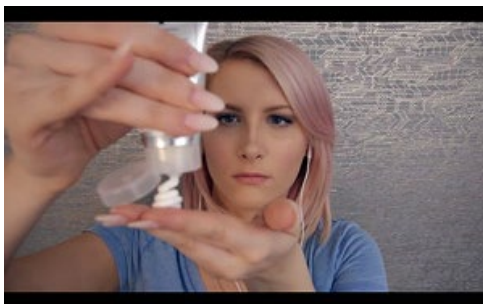
Ally (ASMRrequests) offers testimonials as she taps, strokes, and displays some of her favorite commodities.



She tells viewers this video is not sponsored.



Still, she lingers over logos and brand names.



or textiles (shirts, rugs, curtains). In “17 Different ASMR Triggers—Multiple Sounds for Relaxation,” for instance, Water Whispers Ilse captures in close-up two sets of hands as they alternately rub a synthetic purse, run a chopstick across a bag of salt, zip and unzip a windbreaker’s pocket, shred a sheet of paper towel, and scratch the top of an empty plastic case. Ilse does not address the camera or speak as she and a friend manipulate their materials.

In others, artists feature cosmetic or medicinal tools and products. They tap bottles, apply balm, stroke hairbrushes, and spritz essential oils. In the representative video, “Travel-Sized ASMR & Life Update,” Ally, of the YouTube channel ASMRrequests, shares the “nice little sounds” she elicits from the “toiletries and ... life essentials” with which she travels. Ally brings on screen with her a carrying case quilted in black patent leather. “I really like my little travel case,” she says, holding it up beside her face, “and I was thinking it had some nice sounds that you guys might enjoy.” Angling the case toward an unseen microphone stationed to the left of the camera, corresponding spatially with the viewer’s ear, she splays the fleshy pads of her manicured fingers across the front of the bag and begins to rap gently on its shiny surface. Each finger adheres to the plastic as she raises and drops it, so a slow, sticky rhythm sounds in a headphones-equipped viewer’s left ear-bud.

For those susceptible to “ASMR,” these ministrations provoke a physical sensation similar to another’s touch, as viewers report in the comments they post on YouTube. Trigger videos thus render the object world an extension of the body, marshaling (or “assembling,” to borrow from Deleuze and Guattari) familiar items to expand our ability to impress upon others and to feel impressions.[18] They enable those who are alone to experience a sensation only contact with an external force or actor can confer, and they invite acolytes to search out and discover which particular materials or motions, when tapped, stroked, or mimed, best stimulate their bodies.

Trigger videos endorse, in their very form, the fundamental view of user-generated ASMR media’s nature and function its larger community shares. When ASMRtists claim a video “triggers” an automatic response, they construct ASMR media as neutral content that spontaneously incites an essentially corporeal reaction free from cultural or historical influence. They imagine they engage with their materials, and the bodies they touch on the other side of the screen, in value-free, universalizing, and biological ways. The language of “triggers” confers upon the cultural practices these videos perform the authority of physiology, as if viewers activate by watching specific activities an uncontrollable physical response.

This understanding of ASMR media’s nature and function suggests trigger videos and their effects exceed or disrupt the systems of meaning and value—economic, political, social—that most often determine how we today encounter objects, or representations of them. If consumer capitalism’s market designers usually govern the ways we discover, use, and understand the items, or commodities, around us, assigning to products by way of images and words both the utility and surplus values that foment mass desire for them, ASMRtists choose their triggering materials for reasons allegedly irreducible to use and branding. Although many produce sponsored content, many others make clear they do not intend to sell the products they handle. Rather, artists insist they select their materials because of sensuous attributes that surpass the properties conventional markets value. Although Ally explains to us that she purchased her travel case because its quilting looks “classy,” for example, she taps it on camera because it is tacky and hard.

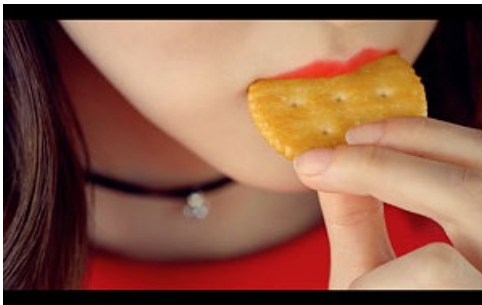
This view, however, does not account for some of the historical forces that



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZhXKS18n2A&t=402s>.



Marketing campaigns appropriate user-generated ASMR media's techniques to amplify the sounds and expressions of consumption's pleasures. Ikea's online ASMR advertisement features hands fondling and drumming on the brand's commodities.



A Ritz advertisement released for Korean markets zooms in on the consuming mouth and augments the crunch of a cracker.

influence ASMR media's style, content, and reception. A biological understanding of "triggers" does not take into account, for one, the role identity categories such as race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity play in an ASMRtist's popularity.[19] (I return to this problem in the next section.) Neither can it explain how a range of commercial practices and the interests they serve enable and shape ASMR media's proliferation on YouTube. ASMR media in general not only extend possibilities for haptic exchange; they also commoditize them in new ways, so that the content creators share does not circulate in a disinterested online space.

On the contrary, market interests influence (and are influenced by) ASMR media. These videos emerge with, rely upon, and bolster markets for mobile devices and for the material networks that animate them. They court corporate and individual sponsorships that generate capital both for artists and for the platforms that inspire and disseminate their content. ASMR content also simultaneously draws inspiration from and contributes to marketing's established genres and the service industry's recognizable protocols, reproducing, intensifying, and revitalizing some of consumer capitalism's most cherished affects.

First, viewers who watch ASMR media online pay several times over, in both capital and attention, to do so. A viewer must have access to an internet-ready device, an internet connection, and electricity in order to stream ASMR content. In addition, ASMRtists solicit donations in their videos and in the descriptions that accompany them, inviting fans to support their work with donations sent through PayPal and Patreon (a crowd-funding site that brings to techno-enfranchised multitudes the aristocratic practice of patronage). They also promote products for corporate brands. As journalists have reported, digital talent agencies such as Ritual Network represent particularly influential ASMRtists (Olivia Kissper ASMR, Lily Whispers) and help them partner with corporate sponsors.[20]

Most significantly, viewers who access ASMR media through YouTube, the platform that makes the community possible, participate in the standard monetizing practices the site implements for UGC. Thanks to YouTube's "Partner Program," which Google, the site's parent company, launched in 2007 to encourage users to post original content, YouTube now shares with creators the revenue its advertisements generate. YouTube provides to content creators guidelines that help them prepare their sites for monetization and analytic tools they might study to garner views and increase profits.[21] At the same time, YouTube tracks, collects, and shares or sells data about viewers' habits to advertisers,[22] rendering viewers' attention itself a commodity and exploiting what scholars call "digital audience labor." [23] These processes allow YouTube to monetize content and ensure monetization influences that content and its forms. [24]

The fact that ASMR media draws inspiration from marketing strategies and service protocols also challenges the view that videos produce pleasure in purely autonomous, physiological ways. This is in part why user-generated ASMR conventions, despite some of their more eccentric or avant-garde applications, have proven to be so easily adaptable for commercialization.[25] Trigger videos already reproduce many of the techniques marketers have developed to encourage consumption. In videos similar to "Travel-Sized ASMR," influencers couple unexpected triggers with reflections upon the more orthodox satisfactions commodities deliver. In this case, after Ally caresses and admires her plastic case, she goes on to describe and handle other products, explaining why she uses each "life essential." She praises an exfoliating sponge, reads the packaging for a tin of Olly "Restful Sleep" vitamin gummies, and applies Skinflx lotion to her hands. Because Ally has shared sponsored videos in the past, to some viewers' dismay, she emphasizes no corporation underwrites her voice in "Travel-Sized ASMR"—"Before I get started," she says early on, "I just want to let you know this is actually not a sponsored video; I'm not endorsing any of these particular brands"—but she nonetheless borrows throughout it marketing's testimonial

gestures. She performs and amplifies the sensuous gratifications of her own consumption, just as do actors featured in ASMR advertisements for Ritz crackers or Dove chocolate.

Such videos share a common impulse both with traditional promotions and with “unboxing” and “haul” videos, other popular — and frequently sponsored — YouTube genres dedicated more plainly to commodity fetishism (many of which creators now tag for ASMR). In all of these, influencers enable viewers to experience vicariously the pleasures of consumption, sharing moments of acquisition, anticipations built before use, and the prized gratifications of applying, wearing, or ingesting. Many trigger videos duplicate and intensify consumption’s happy affects, monetizing anew items that have technically been “consumed” already. They extend through the attention economy’s devices, advertisements, and algorithms a commodity’s capacity to generate capital far beyond what it yields at its original point of purchase. In addition to being sold, products now also may be unboxed, stroked, and caressed on screen, often just after advertisements for similar commodities air. Trigger videos thereby render consumerism itself consumable, multiplying revenue, not only for designers, manufacturers, and suppliers, but also for the attention economy’s new digital and cultural stakeholders.

Because ASMRtists often understand and present their performances as prompts for disinterested and automatic corporeal experiences, they naturalize and reinforce, even as they sometimes challenge, the established attitudes toward commodities corporate marketing strategies promote across media. And they join us more intimately than ever before with our commodities, which have become, for ASMR media, our very bodies—what we touch and what touches us.

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## “Personal attention”: monetizing eros and agape



Although many ASMR channels on YouTube feature white, femme, cisgender women, the ASMR community is international and diverse. Matt (Power of Sound) plays a massage therapist. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPB4DMPnei4>.



Gender-fluid ASMRtist River posts campy, self-aware versions of ASMR's established genres. The ironically titled “Relaxing Face Inspection” showcases his smart brand of erotic comedy—he briefly takes on the menacing voice of a sadistic caretaker as he lovingly pokes and prods “your” face. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qXiaQ4kf8ng>

Another ASMR genre, videos titled and tagged for “personal attention,” discloses anew what Foucault and Deleuze knew of the pleasures endemic to modernity’s disciplinary or control societies—the techniques that individualize, examine, and order collectives for elite interests endure in part because they confer upon subjects their own deep satisfactions.[26] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) These videos signal millions of viewers across the globe want to participate (or at least, pretend to participate) in discipline’s medical, physiological, and psychological routines, perhaps because, as Deleuze put it almost thirty years ago, “capitalism still keeps three-quarters of humanity in extreme poverty, too poor to have debts and too numerous to be confined.”[27] Across a global spectrum of inequality, ASMR content frames as a privilege participation in capital’s regimes of control, made hyper-visible via widely available networked media.

While trigger videos focus our attention on the materials ASMRtists use to extend our haptic capacities, personal attention texts conceal their extending materials to simulate intimate, unmediated encounters between artists and viewers. Creators “touch” our faces, hair, and shoulders by caressing camera lenses and scratching binaural microphones, transforming into extensions of our bodies the sensitive, expensive audio-visual apparatuses they use to record themselves. As we sit before our screens and become those worthy of attention, the technologies that extend our corporeality hide in plain sight.

In personal attention videos, ASMRtists stage many different kinds of encounters between those who give and those who receive attention. They pretend to be doctors and therapists, opening on the other side of the camera a space for patients, or they play flight attendants, receptionists, and stylists, casting an audience of clients. In some videos, ASMRtists pretend to be viewers’ girlfriends, boyfriends, friends, or family members; they pause as if listening to our complaints and whisper comforting nothings. Many of the ASMR community’s most influential figures—those able to sustain themselves with capital they earn through YouTube, PayPal, Patreon, and corporate sponsorships—do not role-play at all. They speak as themselves, YouTube celebrities aware that millions seek out, subscribe to, and view their content.

If trigger videos promise only to elicit an automatic sensory response, personal attention videos more explicitly promise to supplement gendered care-work at a time when its conventional forms are in crisis. Creators, many of whom present as cisgender women,[28] assume trauma and anxiety dominate viewers’ lives, and they seek to ameliorate these troubles with love and empathy, putting on the various erotic, affectionate, and compassionate affects traditionally associated with women’s labor. Some comfort viewers they imagine suffer from vague, generalizable maladies—they soothe to sleep anxious, self-conscious insomniacs or rehabilitate taxed bodies. Others construct more specific audiences, addressing complaints particular to corporate capitalism’s competitive, tedious contemporary environments. They bolster exhausted students studying for exams, massage stiff office workers, or shave male executives.

Although many of these personal attention videos rely upon erotic intimacy’s familiar tactics—mouth sounds, whispers, and more—the ASMR community is anxious to differentiate its aims and gratifications from pornography’s.[29] As China’s recent ban on ASMR media highlights, creators have good reason to emphasize these differences. In 2018, China’s anti-pornography office issued a

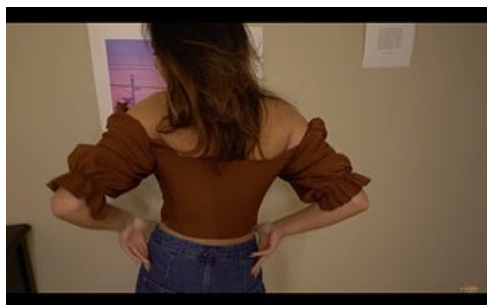




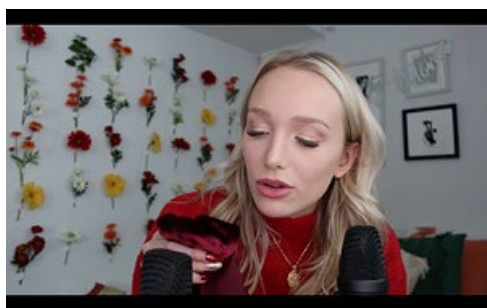
Many ASMRtists post sponsored “haul” videos. They praise, touch, and try on products that sponsors send and then share discount codes with viewers. Tena ASMR tries on a hat for her sponsored video, “ASMR Winter Haul.”



Sarai (Peace and Saraity) models a dress in a sponsored ASMR haul video for “curvy girls.”



Lily Whispers tries on a blouse in a sponsored ASMR haul video for “affordable” clothing.



GwenGwiz strokes a velvet bodysuit in a sponsored haul video featuring “fabric sounds and whispers.”

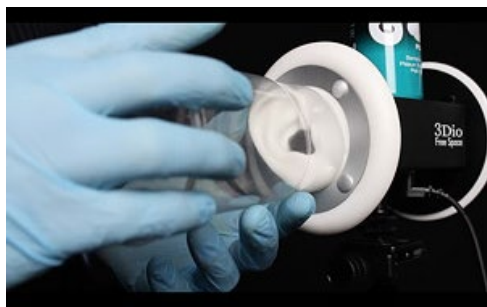
statement calling for video streaming sites to purge posts tagged for ASMR, citing an imperative to protect young viewers from “harmful” content.[30] In the US, norms and policies for the video sharing websites that host ASMR media help viewers differentiate between pornographic and more widely permissible, if still erotically charged, texts.[31] YouTube does not allow ASMRtists to post and monetize “nudity or sexual content,” while sites devoted exclusively to pornography do. On popular sites such as YouPorn, Pornhub, and Red Tube, posters adopt and adapt for the avowed purpose of sexual arousal user-generated ASMR media’s formal and stylistic features: in one video tagged for ASMR, a poster zooms in on her genitals, which she positions before a visible microphone, and amplifies masturbatory sounds; in another, a nurse role-play turns into a tryst.

On YouTube, by contrast, ASMRtists sometimes employ sensuous, even carnal sounds and gestures, but they neither expose themselves nor explicitly aim to arouse. Instead, women seem to most successfully win mass audiences for their YouTube channels when they cultivate, in addition to a tame eroticism, nurturing and serene mannerisms. Maria of Gentle Whispering ASMR, one of the ASMR community’s most popular and influential figures, helped to popularize this simultaneously erotic and sublime intimacy style. Maria is lovely, gentle, and comfortably exotic, at least for an Anglophone audience accustomed to seeing Eastern European women portrayed as care- and sex-workers. Fan comments indicate her videos successfully play to both sides of Freud’s “Madonna-whore” binary, which, responses show, still seem to over-determine contemporary evaluations of women and of the affective labor expected from them.

Maria is not only popular; she also often serves as the ASMR community’s unofficial spokesperson, theorizing both on YouTube and in interviews the nature and function of her own activity as an ASMRtist and YouTube influencer. Since 2011, her channel has attracted more than 1.5 million subscribers, and her content has tallied more than 500 million total views. As Maria revealed in one recent interview, creating ASMR content sustains her financially; thanks to individual and corporate sponsorships (among them Blue Apron and Samsung), she was able to quit a previous administrative position.[32] Maria plays service workers and others in her early videos, but, as fans have come to know and follow her, she now most often speaks to her audience without taking on a fantasy role.

One of ASMR media’s all-time most-watched videos (11 million views since 2016), “~Simple Pleasures~ ASMR Soft Spoken Personal Attention,” signals this shift and marks Maria’s ascent to self-aware ASMR celebrity status.[33] It also exemplifies the suggestive beatitude many female ASMRtists cultivate. The video fades in to a close-up of Maria’s face, set off against an unremarkable tan backdrop. Blond, feminine, and conventionally beautiful, Maria cultivates a soft, on-trend aesthetic—pink lips, neutral nails, big lashes—that complements her quiet voice and languid movements. Smiling tenderly, she looks directly into the camera and welcomes viewers. “Today,” she whispers, a faint Russian accent audible, “I decided to just have some one-on-one time with you. So, no roles, no games,”—she leans in close and drops her voice as her lips brush the unseen microphone that stands in for the viewer’s right ear—“just *pamper-time*.” She says she plans to use some “relaxing techniques” she hopes will “comfort” us, making us feel “sleepy” and “safe.” These include hand movements, tapping sounds, soothing affirmations, and more.

The camera, unrelenting and fixed, keeps a tight close-up on Maria’s face as she strokes and pets it or leans in close to whisper, and her binaural microphones amplify her sighs, her breathing, and her tongue’s wet textures. These sounds and gestures incite the sensual, somatic responses a lover’s attentions might, but at the same time, Maria offers us the comforts associated with *agape*, or selfless



ASMRtists experiment with sound and visuals. In "ASMR 3Dio Binaural Shaving Foam Frenzy, Latex Gloves & Ear Clean up," ASMRSurge affixes a clear plastic cup to a dummy's ear and sprays shaving cream into it. Silently, he stirs and pats the cream with a rubber spatula.



love, of both the filial and transcendental varieties. Maria moves her fingers along the camera's margins as if to stroke our hair and reassures us we are valued, as might a mother, a saint, or an angel, all figures to which fans compare her in their comments. She recasts our suffering—sourced as it might be in the range of contemporary economic, political, and social forces that try us—as timeless, universal misery, familiar to all mortal creatures and therefore redeemable by transcendental love:

"You know our existence as humans is a constant struggle, and it's very unfortunate. But the reality is, it is a blessing and a curse. We're just here to experience everything, good and bad. We all go through it. You're never alone in this world, so, just remember that. We all do our best. And I know that you do your best as well, and I appreciate it, I personally do."

As do the gods of monotheistic traditions and the martyrs who serve earth's poor in their names, Maria establishes intimacy with anonymous masses she need not know. She promises to love anyone who steps into the online frame that she opens, accepting us regardless of our identities, our circumstances, or our transgressions. She also refigures our perpetual access to her image and voice, available onscreen day or night, as a new kind of pseudo-transcendental presence, eternally available and consoling. When Maria promises she is with us, that we are never alone, she offers an ecstatic, unconditional love similar to the kind believers imagine transcendental beings bestow.

Maria's YouTube channel pioneers this complex form of care, makes it available for monetization, and theorizes its nature and function. Personal attention videos such as those Maria posts commoditize intimacy just as trigger videos commoditize touch—viewers pay in capital (devices, services) and attention (viewing advertisements, yielding data) alike to experience the new forms. As do other top YouTube influencers, Maria openly acknowledges the fact that viewers support her financially, be it simply by watching her on YouTube and surrendering to the platform's sponsors and data-farming practices, or by taking a more active role, donating capital through PayPal or Patreon. She and others make special content available to donors and sometimes thank viewers by name for their support.

Maria celebrates and casts in evolutionary terms the mutually beneficial "relationship" she has forged with fans. She interprets the exchange of capital and attention YouTube brokers between artists, viewers, and corporations as itself a form of loving intimacy or, in the language of the social sciences Maria adopts in another popular video, "ASMR | Get Your Groom On | Brushing | Soft Spoken," as a form of "social bonding." "Get Your Groom On" articulates a version of the common evolutionary vision many in the ASMR community—and many of the social scientists, marketers, and amateur enthusiasts who have started to study it—embrace.[34] Stroking the camera, Maria explains what she is doing and why she believes it pleases millions:

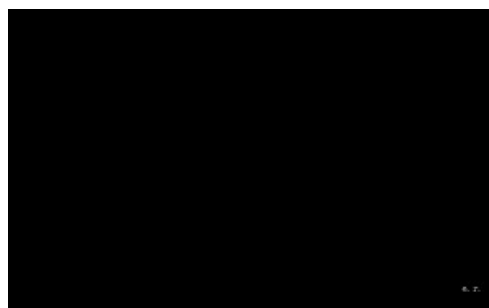
"You know this type of caressing and touching and brushing your hair or just some parts of your body is a type of social bonding. Yes, yes, social bonding. So we are bonding, you and me. Yes, it's a type of grooming. So, grooming is mostly when one living thing gives all of its energy and in a way sacrifices themselves in the moment in order to please another beautiful living thing. It could be quite emotional, but mostly very, very pleasant."

Adopting a language of human behavior familiar across social sciences disciplines (among them sociology and evolutionary psychology), Maria explains that touch brings us pleasure because it facilitates between creatures necessary attachments.

Autodidact and anarchist Paul (Ephemeral Rift) posts darkly comic videos. They weave together literature, philosophy, and popular culture, creating a referential multiverse as heady as it is silly. (Paul describes his fictional universe on his website: <https://ephemeralrift.com/2018/09/23/riftverse-arkham-sanitarium-canon-the-story-so-far-2018-edition/>.) Here, he dresses as a version of H.P. Lovecraft's Nyarlathotep and administers ASMR treatments to a pineapple.



"An Apple a Day Keeps the Stress & Insomnia Away" at once enacts and satirizes the soothing sounds and hand movements associated with ASMR media's self-care genre. Ephemeral Rift manipulates and rattles an apple fitted with a grenade pin, producing simultaneously (and paradoxically) relaxing and terrifying affects. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjWa8RbnLr0>



Ephemeral Rift's description for "Nihilist ASMR | 10 Hours | 4K (Of Absolutely Nothing)" invites viewers to "Enjoy 10 hours of pure nihilism in stunning 4K resolution! Let the calming, comforting and soothing sights and sounds of nothing help you relax, sleep, experience intense nihilist ASMR tingles, and ease your mind regarding the meaning of life and your own existence. Please do not wear headphones for the best listening experience." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iA911q0gbM8>

While Maria does not draw upon the work of particular social scientists, her account of touch's function shares with established discourses a utilitarian view of corporeal stimulation and a correspondingly essential view of the human.[35] For Maria, grooming gives us pleasure for identifiable biological reasons, and that pleasure in turn serves a purpose, bonding individuals into more or less harmonious collectives that ensure individuals survive and the species endures.

As the video continues, Maria develops this view, explaining why we should understand ASMR's care protocols—Joceline Andersen calls them "distant intimacy" practices[36]—as new expressions of the same fundamental human drives that inspire all other forms of human "bonding." "As of right now," Maria says, running a make-up brush over the camera lens, "our society definitely pushed away from this type of social bonding and grooming is left only for very close people. But before our ancestors used to use this as the most important part of their social life." Today, she continues, "we are surrounded...by oceans, deserts, islands, enormous forests," so "we don't get to socialize so much physically." In response to these new conditions of separation, which are also, it is clear, the conditions of globalization that connect us to and make us aware of distant others we cannot touch, Maria believes we have evolved new grooming and bonding practices that do not require physical proximity. These include, according to the video and the description Maria posts with it, ASMR videos, which can stimulate touch's effects from a distance, and "gossip," which allows us to track others by way of network technologies.

Having recoded these activities as biologically essential, Maria shares some news of her own. She says she will be "moving across the country" this summer, a "dream come true," and she thanks viewers for helping her do so. "You have been with me every step of the way," she says. "I groom you, you groom me. Like a real family. And I always try to make sure that you know how thankful I am for you and how much pleasure this right here [she gestures toward the camera] brings me." Maria here acknowledges a contradiction ASMR's top influencers attempt to resolve in different ways. She at once speaks through a screen to a mass audience and stages intimate scenes in which she pretends to meet a single individual's needs, touching, consoling, and valuing "you." Formally, she slips back and forth between singular and plural second-person address, performing an incongruity fans sometimes joke about in their comments: "Yup, love me some quality 1 on 7.3 million time," one writes in response to Maria's promise in "~Simple Pleasures~" to spend some "one-on-one time" with viewers.[37] In this moment, Maria successfully juggles the fantasy of individualized intimacy she mimics with the reality of the mass audience she reaches. She has caressed "your" face and ears throughout the video, speaking and moving as if ministering to one person, but when she thanks "you" for helping her realize her ambitions and compares "you" to a "real family," she addresses the considerable collective united by its attention to her.

"Get Your Groom On" discloses how Maria frames her relationship to viewers and how she establishes legitimacy for it. First, she sources the attention her audience devotes to her in the species' remote past, suggesting ASMR media gives new expression to timeless drives our primate ancestors fulfilled in other ways. To "groom" is here to go through the motions of stroking and caressing skin and hair—"I groom you," Maria says to the camera—but it is also to watch, fund, and sponsor a stranger's cultural production—"you groom me." This equivalence presents as natural reciprocity a relationship dependent upon corporate algorithms and policies. Second, Maria says she and her viewers are "like a real family." The comparison renders equivalent older intimate forms of love and support, which Maria presents as authentic and absolute ("real"), and the new brand of monetized, impersonal intimacy ASMR media forges through YouTube. Together, these moves confer upon personal attention videos the value evolutionary discourses of biological essentialism assign to inevitable forces beyond human control. They thereby elide the ways purposeful corporate practices make possible, intercede in, and profit from the mutually supportive



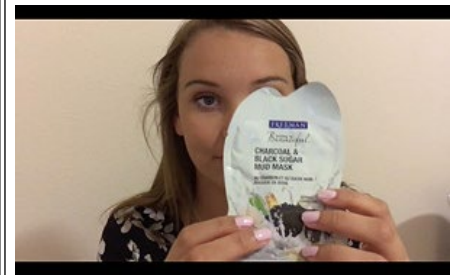
affiliations Maria describes. This evolutionary discourse again naturalizes ASMR media's political economy. It casts as an inexorable species care practice with roots in deep time the remunerative affiliation YouTube makes possible between ASMRtists and their viewers.



Many personal attention videos feature women playing massage therapists, nurses, mothers, friends, and other care-workers. A subgenre of videos within this category fetishizes the ears, enacting services consumers might not seek out "IRL" (in real life).



Sponsored and unsponsored videos for cosmetics and clothing use similar formal techniques. In "ASMR Lush Nighttime Routine with ASMR Darling," posted on Lush Cosmetics's YouTube channel, the popular ASMRtist describes a pink bath bomb and drops it into a tub. A microphone amplifies the bath bomb's sizzle as it foams.

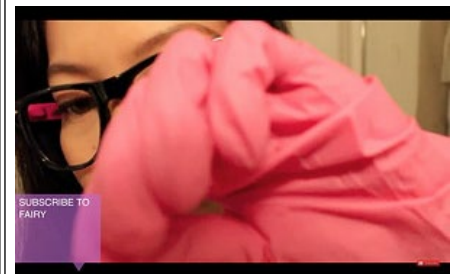


ASMR Darling describes a mud facemask's ingredients and advantages as she crinkles its packaging in the unsponsored video, "ASMR The Ultimate Spa Day! (Unisex)."

Andersen argues the ASMR community relies upon discourses of biological truth in an attempt to ease reception for its "nonstandard" erotic practices and to thereby legitimate its perceived queerness.[38] We might add that another set of consequences follows from ASMR media's popular explanations. By rooting contemporary practices in an evolutionary past, these discourses turn attention away from the ways that purposeful human activity creates the present's crisis of care. Personal attention videos satisfy from within the attention economy needs and desires that economy, with capital accumulation at its center, otherwise fails to fulfill. From this perspective, interested, purposeful forms of creative and economic human activity, rather than inevitable, inhuman processes, help generate and sustain ASMR media. To view the content they help shape as an expression of timeless, absolute need salvable by selfless and eternal transcendental love forecloses this insight and the possibilities for broader change it holds.



Charlotte (Fairy Char) welcomes the viewer



She takes notes as she asks about your

to “the ear groomers and spa”: “I’ll be cleaning your ears today.”

needs and preferences, conferring the pleasures of examination.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UHIZUBUbQLE&t=1740s>

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## “Self-care”: new media’s romantics



“You’re so beautiful,” Layla (Trigger the Tingles) tells viewers. “Your resilience is inspiring to me.”



Layla represents her videos’ availability on YouTube as a new form of intimate presence: “So if you ever think that you’re alone, I’m here for you.”



On her YouTube channel’s “About” page, Layla tells a story many content creators in the community share. She came to ASMR media to relieve “depression & insomnia” and then began making videos as a “way of giving back to the community.” [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC\\_ctGt8dc1YEFWzNfV2Rp8g/about](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_ctGt8dc1YEFWzNfV2Rp8g/about)

Nineteenth-century poets celebrated and fetishized “nature” just as industrialization transformed its materials into consumable resources and destroyed the pastoral forms of life closest to it. William Wordsworth famously taught readers how to bring back to a drab urban hole bright memories of flowers, sky, and wind, modeling in poems how one might recall the pleasures of the countryside in the city’s sooty darkness.[39] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) A similar impulse to protect or remember old forms of experience and their outmoded systems of value animates a final ASMR genre, videos that reproduce discourses of “self-care.” ASMRtists recommend a range of self-care practices other online communities also endorse, but I conclude here with videos that promise to alleviate the psychic and corporeal dangers viewers face when we spend too much time sitting at our machines. This subgenre of self-care video calls us back to a world off-screen and to our own basic metabolism with it. It encourages us to look away from our devices and aims to teach us how to breathe again. At the same time, however, an obvious contradiction haunts these videos, which formally capture and secure our attention even as they beg us to darken our screens. In this way, ASMR media and the attention economy’s structures monetize even the desire to look away.

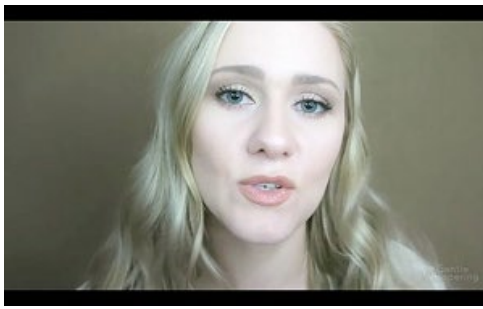
CordeliaCharter ASMR’s video, “ASMR Reiki to Balance and Heal Your Soul,” reveals most strikingly these contradictions. The video addresses its viewer as a returning client for whom Cordelia performs the protocols of “Reiki,” a modern Japanese healing practice Western “New Age” communities have adapted and popularized since the late twentieth century. Throughout the session, Cordelia uses the much newer language of self-care left critics such as Laurie Penny argue has proliferated online in response to the anxieties and challenges life under corporate capitalism engenders for many.[40] This discourse encourages us to maintain our own physical and psychic wellbeing in an environment that erodes our time and ability to do so. It recommends we solve capitalism’s crisis of care through individual interventions, admonishing us to meet the needs of body and spirit—eat nutritious foods, sleep, go outside, exercise, relax, relinquish negative thoughts, etc. It also often suggests we purchase goods and services to in order to do so.

In “ASMR Reiki,” Cordelia welcomes “you” back to her office, a vaguely corporate urban loft she projects via green screen, and she begins your session by checking for “tension.” She moves her hands back and forth before the camera, says she detects problems around your brow and shoulders, and asks if “you find yourself squinting at a monitor.” As Cordelia works on “your energy,” moving her hands, a coil of copper wire, and a penlight across the camera’s field, she identifies white-collar employment as the source of your distress. “In today’s world, we have desk jobs,” she says, “and it’s very rare that we get activity during the day.” To combat the “stress” that builds “because we’re doing a lot of squinting and scratching at the keyboard,” Cordelia recommends self-massage. She opens her mouth and presses a slender finger against her cheek to model a technique she says relieves pain around the jawline.

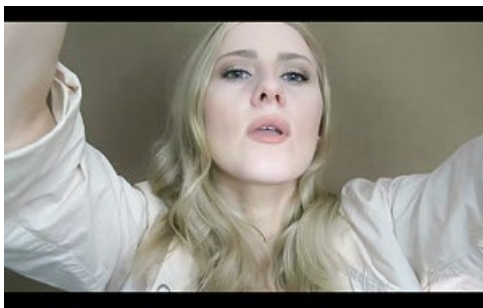
As Cordelia caresses her own face, she recognizes how difficult it can be to practice self-care, and yet, she encourages us to give “mindfulness” a try:

“I think a lot of [tension] can be mitigated by relaxing your jaw and being mindful of how much you’re at the screen, so if you can, and I





Maria (Gentle Whispering ASMR) is one of the community's most successful and influential content creators. Her video, “~Simple Pleasures~ ASMR Soft Spoken Personal Attention,” typifies the personal attention genre and the new modes of commoditized intimacy ASMR celebrities perform through it. It also endorses the biologically essential view of ASMR media many social scientists and community members approve.



In “~Simple Pleasures~,” Maria imagines “stress” as a material substance she physically draws away from the viewer with her calming gestures.



ASMR media often attempt to make feelings, sensations, and their sources substantial in this way, figuring them, for instance, as unseen “energy.”



In this case, Maria pretends to gather “stress” between her palms, turns to the side, and blows “it” off camera.

know it’s sometimes very difficult, set a timer for yourself. You can just put a key word, like “eyes,” “break”—whatever you want to put—that just reminds you to take, either a quick walk around the office, or just look at something that isn’t a screen—I know it’s tempting to look at your phone, but just looking at something else for a little bit. If you have a window, you can look out your window. But of course, not all offices are equipped with a window, so you could... get up and get a drink of water.”

The attention economy, Cordelia notices, induces us to spend as much time as possible at our devices, for both work and pleasure. Perpetual entrepreneurs, we are always on call, completing tasks, not only for employers, but also for the supplementary activities (the term “side hustle” describes these) we take up in order to make ends meet in the so-called “gig” economy. In between, we cultivate social media profiles, read news, shop, and watch TV shows, pornography, YouTube content, and more online. As we do, Cordelia reminds us, our bones and sinews suffer—necks stiffen, backs ache—and our isolation intensifies. We forget to drink water, talk to others, or look out the window. Discourses of self-care, which begin from the assumption that the “self” or individual is under destructive pressure, suggest the standard unit of liberalism’s disciplinary societies is now an aging, outmoded construct we can barely hold together at the level of experience. [41]

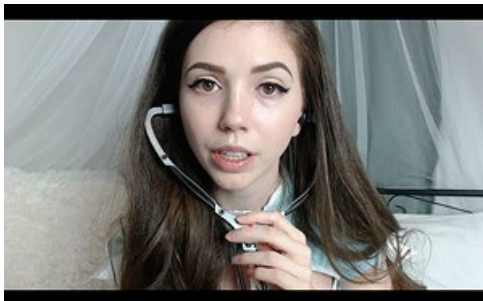
Cordelia joins other self-care cheerleaders—among them “@tinycarebot,” a Twitter bot that implores followers to “please take a little bit of time to eat something” or “remember to rest your eyes and look at nature please”[42]—in promoting physiologically essential activities, including simply looking from time to time at three-dimensional objects. These self-care videos beg us to alleviate the attention-induced suffering work and play alike engender by policing our own concentration, reducing screen-time, and performing basic maintenance tasks to sustain our flesh and bone. A comparable video, Lulu Indigo’s “ASMR Intense Relaxation (Close Whisper),” encourages us to return to our surroundings and to our bodies. “I want you to just become aware of everything around you,” Lulu Indigo says, asking us to notice what we can “touch,” “hear,” and “see.” She tells us next to take a few deep breaths with her, as if showing us how to master again a vital competency we have lost.

A formal contradiction obviously haunts the genre these videos typify, undercutting the ameliorating strategies they recommend. Artists such as Cordelia and Lulu Indigo promise to reinvigorate and renew us by calling us back to an off-screen materiality kinder to our brains and bodies, and yet, they cannot ultimately liberate our attention. This is because the form they choose, by nature, confers upon viewers a pleasurable sensation (“tingles”) only if we watch and listen. The genre binds our senses to our device’s frame, even as the artists speaking to us inside of it gesture beyond it. These self-care videos simultaneously capture our eyes and ears and beg us to look elsewhere. They acknowledge our desire to oppose or break with the habits the economy of attention inculcates, and to ameliorate their attendant bodily and psychic dangers, but they do so, without irony, by keeping us plugged in. The attention economy thereby co-opts, contains, and profits from a radical yearning to direct our attention elsewhere.

When ASMR media presents itself as a mode of self-care, one of mainstream media’s most popular strategies for combatting the present’s crisis of care, it perpetuates the notion that sufferers can best respond to this crisis by changing individual habits. Self-care discourses encourage us to maintain our pressured psyches and sedentary bodies by purchasing commodities, seeking out wellness



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8jUVci17vE>



Sharing sites for pornography host videos that combine standard ASMR media conventions with sexually explicit content, as does this nurse role-play.

services, or performing basic domestic activities, rather than by transforming through collective action the conditions that threaten many. Left critics have argued this discourse deflects attention away from the broader political and economic sources of present anxiety only revolutionary action could actually address.[43] ASMR self-care content disingenuously suggests individual solutions the attention economy sanctions can best amend an emergency historical forms of human organization have produced.

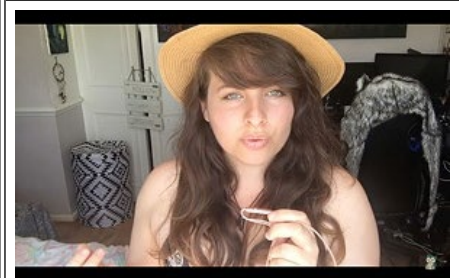
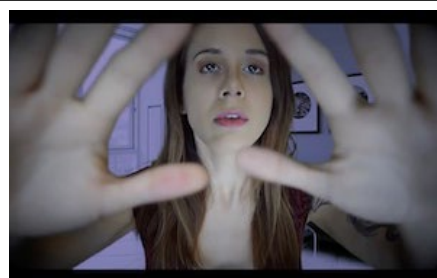
## Conclusion

The novel modes of intimacy ASMR media proliferate reveal simultaneously the promises and challenges of our moment. On one hand, these texts extend a single individual's loving gestures to millions of viewers, solacing and pleasuring us in strange, exciting ways. This in itself is an astounding feat, and ASMR media displays the rich array of new styles and genres we have invented to care for each other online. On the other hand, the platforms and services that have enabled ASMR media to emerge ensure these new forms of intimacy also function as, and in tandem with, commodities, so that corporate stakeholders mediate, influence, and benefit from the new intimacies. Viewers on the left might therefore consider these forms critically, not as would conservatives suspicious of monetized care- or sex-work, but rather as would those attuned to the powerful interests that imbricate new media when it is constituted in part by the attention economy's network forces. Critics might then better consider what conditions limit love and care in our world, and imagine how we might collectively transform them. ASMR media's modes of self-presentation can discourage critical scrutiny of this kind.

Although new online forms of intimacy have their own exciting materiality, a yearning for a tactile or haptic experience different from the version ASMR media offers (and monetizes) often seems to haunt these videos. Maria registers this longing at the end of "Get Your Groom On," abandoning the illusion of intimacy she has created and contrasting ASMR bonding with off-screen (call them "IRL") exchanges. She privileges time spent grooming, she says, because,

"you don't have to talk at all. You feel another person is touching you, and you feel them, like, in you, on you. Isn't that fascinating? I always thought it was. Even right now, I am brushing your hair, and it might come off as if I'm actually with you. And I would be more than happy if that would actually happen, but sometimes you miss that bond with a woman, you know. Having another friend, a woman, a sister type of figure, brush your hair, that would feel awesome. I would love to feel that someday again."

ASMR media's most popular angel here describes the aspiration that brings a mass audience to her videos. ASMR content is perpetually accessible and freshly soothing; it offers a way for our devices to seem to love us back, to appear to gaze back at us, with affection, just as we gaze upon them. And yet, many ASMR acolytes still crave the intimate, corporeal attention an embodied human with leisure, desire, and love enough to caress us might tender. Read critically, ASMR media finally encourage us to ask why attention of this kind, as well as figures across gender categories available to confer it freely upon us, are today so dear and rare.



Cordelia Charter recommends “self-care” as a way to combat the psychic and physical troubles endemic to life in the attention economy. She models self-massage and recommends exercise, healthy eating, and decreased screen time.

Lulu Indigo models how to inhale and exhale. She also encourages viewers to look at the world around us: “What can you see? Can you see a blue sky? Can you see green grass?” When she looks around herself for inspiration, though, she inadvertently demonstrates the challenges we face when we consider turning away from technology: “Can you see... electronics?” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1VYNnPXMjos>.

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### Notes

1. In 2010, Jennifer Allen coined the phrase “Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response” and founded a Facebook group devoted to the previously “unnamed” sensation. See Richard, “History of ASMR,” for a frequently updated timeline of the emergence and development of ASMR media. An ASMR enthusiast and medical doctor, Richard has become the community’s self-appointed amateur historian. [[return to page 1](#)]
2. Barratt and Davis, “Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR): A Flow-Like Mental State,” 1.
3. To view ASMR-inspired advertisements, see Ikea USA; BBDO Worldwide; and Glenmorangie. Glenmorangie produced advertisements and funded research with market applications. See Barratt, Spence, and Davis. The authors try to “establish key multisensory factors contributing to the successful induction of ASMR through online media” (1).
4. For peer-reviewed social and natural sciences research on ASMR, see Barratt and Davis; del Campo and Kehle, “Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) and Frisson;” Fredborg, Clark, and Smith, “An Examination of Personality Traits;” and Smith, Fredborg, and Kornelsen, “An Examination of the Default Mode Network.” For representative accounts in the popular media, see Beck, “How to Have a ‘Brain Orgasm’;” Cheadle, “The Good Feeling No One Can Explain;” and Collins, “Why Music Gives You the Chills.”
5. No scientist has yet published a peer-reviewed version of this argument, but Collins; Higa, “The Technicalities of the Tingles;” Richard, “Origin Theory of ASMR 2.0;” Wikipedia, “ASMR: Evolutionary History;” and Young and Blasvert, *Idiot’s Guide to ASMR*, circulate versions of it inspired by existing research. See, for instance, Nelson and Geher, “Mutual Grooming in Human Dyadic Relationships.”
6. See Andersen, “Now You’ve Got the Shiveries;” Gallagher, “Eliciting Euphoria Online;” and Jaramillo, “ASMR: Auratic Encounters.”
7. Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*, gives one broad account of the crisis. Jaramillo also observes ASMR media seemed to gain popularity in response to economic and political crisis.
8. Davenport and Beck defined the popular phrase “attention economy” in 2002 (*The Attention Economy*). Wu, *The Attention Merchants*, and Bosker, “The Binge Breaker,” give updated accounts of its development.
9. Fraser, “Contradictions of Capitalism and Care,” 99.
10. Ibid., 99.
11. See, for instance, Ahuja, “It Feels Good to Be Measured” and Gallagher.
12. See Gallagher.

13. See Jaramillo. Gallagher claims critical and hermeneutic methods cannot help us understand ASMR media.

14. Jaramillo, 4.

15. Ibid. Jaramillo concludes that “ASMR will resemble a subcultural gift economy less and less” as capital exploits and expands the community’s forms. I identify some of the ways commercial interests have always helped to shape them.

16. McLuhan, “The Medium is the Message,” 7.

17. McLuhan and Fiore (1967) anticipated this expansion early on: “electric circuitry,” they wrote in *The Medium Is the Massage*, is “an extension of the central nervous system” (40). Gallagher gives an account of how ASMR media produce sensation out of sound’s sensuous excesses (9-11).

18. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*.

19. Andersen offers one important reading of the role gender and sexuality play in the ASMR community.

20. See Fowler.

21. See YouTube’s support documents: “Introduction to the YouTube Partner Program;” “Make Sure Your Site’s Pages Are Ready for AdSense;” and “YouTube Analytics Basics.”

22. See Google, “Your Data.”

23. Nixon, “The Old Media Business in the New.”

24. Nixon; Postigo, “The Socio-Technical Architecture of Digital Labor; and Wasko and Erickson, “The Political Economy of YouTube,” offer significant critical readings of YouTube’s capitalization program and its effects.

25. Sony, Pepsi, Ritz, KFC, and others have also released ASMR-inspired advertisements for markets in the US, China, Korea, and more.

26. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* and Deleuze, “Postscript.” [[return to page 2](#)]

27. Deleuze, “Postscript,” 181.

28. Some male ASMRtists, such as Dmitri of the YouTube channel Massage ASMR, have prospered. Dmitri has posted twice as many videos as has Maria of the popular YouTube channel Gentle Whispering ASMR, but his channel has won only about half as many subscribers as has hers.

29. See Miller, “Whispering on the Internet,” and Richard. Richard’s interview with Allen reveals how the ASMR community’s anxiety about sexual pleasure has constituted its practices from the outset. The label “ASMR” came to replace earlier terms such as “braingasm” because its technical (call it pseudo-scientific) quality allowed an emerging online whisper community to describe its fetishized sensation without reference to sexual arousal.

30. Abraham, “Why China Has Banned Videos.”

31. Not only state censors worry about whether or not ASMR media is pornographic. On nofap.com, a “community-based porn recovery” site, users attempting to overcome addictions to online pornography debate the question in forums titled “Is ASMR pornography?;” “Is ASMR a legitimate substitute [for porn]?”; “ASMR—good or bad?;” and “Can I watch ASMR videos during my reboot?” Community members hold different views. Some believe ASMR content is benign; others argue it perpetuates the same harmful behaviors that isolate porn addicts and discourage them from developing human relationships offline.

32. See Miller.
33. Maria, “~Simple Pleasures~.”
34. See Collins; Higa; Richard, “Origin Theory;” Wikipedia; and Young and Blansert.
35. Criminologist Travis Hirschi first elaborated “social bonding theory” in *Causes of Delinquency*. He argued individuals able to foster strong “bonds” across institutions—family, workplace, nation—do not as often commit crimes or suffer psychological distress. For more recent social sciences views ASMR media popularizes, see Nelson and Geher.
36. Andersen, 685.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid., 695.
39. Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*. [[return to page 3](#)]
40. Penny, “Lifehacks of the Poor and Aimless.”
41. Deleuze, “Postscript,” predicted network forces would increasingly treat individuals as “dividuals.” See Mirowski for an updated expansion of this insight.
42. TinyCareBot, “Remember” and “Please.”
43. Penny.
44. Some of Silicon Valley’s young defectors have started to advocate and organize activity that resists the attention economy’s imperatives. See “Time Well Spent,” a project that brings together software designers, sociologists, programmers, graphic designers, and more to “invent a more human future.” Left critics have noticed the project still seems to valorize technology.

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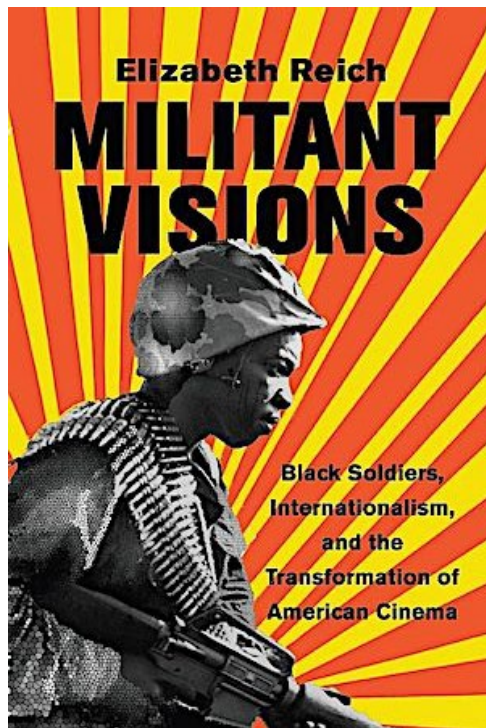
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Elizabeth Reich's *Militant Visions* reads the black soldier in U.S. cinema as a transnational figure that exposes the links between U.S. racism and imperialism. The book offers a valuable lens through which to also analyze contemporary debates about minority inclusion in the U.S. military.

## Soldiering for rights

review by [Shakti Jaising](#)

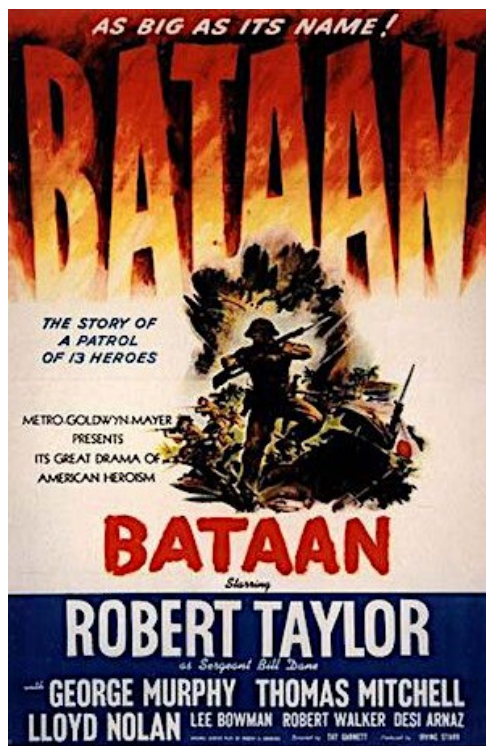
Elizabeth Reich, *Militant Visions: Black Soldiers, Internationalism, and the Transformation of American Cinema* (Rutgers University Press, 2016)

Elizabeth Reich's *Militant Visions: Black Soldiers, Internationalism, and the Transformation of American Cinema* offers a thought-provoking analysis of representations of black soldiers in American cinema from the 1940s through the 1970s. The book begins in the World War II period, when collaboration between government, Hollywood, and black media makers produced the image of a patriotic black soldier, in order to prompt African Americans to join the military. Although designed to serve the interests of an imperialist state, in effect these images of proud black soldiers—some of the first dignified representations of African Americans in Hollywood—reflected the imperatives of the civil rights struggle as well. In the post-World War II period, and especially with the rise of the Blaxploitation films of the early 1970s, independent black filmmakers markedly transformed this figure, deploying it towards articulations of an anti-state critique. On the whole, Reich shows, the cinematic black soldier was throughout the “long civil rights movement” [1][[open endnotes in new window](#)] a complex, transnational figure, charged with the potential to galvanize both conservative and radical agendas and to expose the links between domestic racism and international violence.

In the interest of full disclosure, I should state at the outset that I am a friend of the author. What follows, therefore, is not a traditional review of *Militant Visions*. Rather, while I begin with a brief description of the book and its contributions to U.S. film history, the second half of this essay uses the book as a point of departure to reflect on the contemporary cinematic figure of the transgender soldier during a time of perpetual war, deepening domestic inequality and further entrenchment of racism, anti-immigrant sentiment, and transphobia.

On July 26, 2017, President Trump announced on Twitter that transgender people would be banned from the military and support for gender reassignment surgery for existing service members would be discontinued. This announcement came a year after the Obama administration ended the ban on transgender persons serving openly in the military—and exactly 69 years after President Truman's executive order calling for the elimination of racial discrimination in military and federal employment.[2] Trump's announcement generated much unease within the transgender community and brought to the fore patriotic depictions of transgender soldiers that recalled similar mobilizations of black soldiers in the mid-twentieth century—raising anew debates about whether minority inclusion in our imperialist military is the best route to gaining basic human rights in the United States[3].

As the U.S. government's War on Terror continues to devastate much of the Middle East and South Asia,[4] and as our media turns a blind eye to this devastation while uncritically celebrating the military as a key force for social change, *Militant Visions'* history of the cinematic black soldier offers timely



*Militant Visions* opens with an analysis of MGM's *Bataan* (1943), one of a few popular films featuring patriotic black soldiers that emerged out of collaboration between Hollywood, Roosevelt's Office of War Administration, and the NAACP — and that was designed to elicit the participation of African Americans in World War II.



In *Bataan*, Kenneth Spenser plays Wesley Epps, one of the first dignified portrayals of African Americans in Hollywood. Set in the Philippines, the film emphasizes the black soldier's muscular torso and, as Reich shows, sets him up as a contrast with the "Filipino figure of colonial backwardness."

commentary on the possibilities and limits of minority integration through the U.S. military-industrial-media-complex.[5]

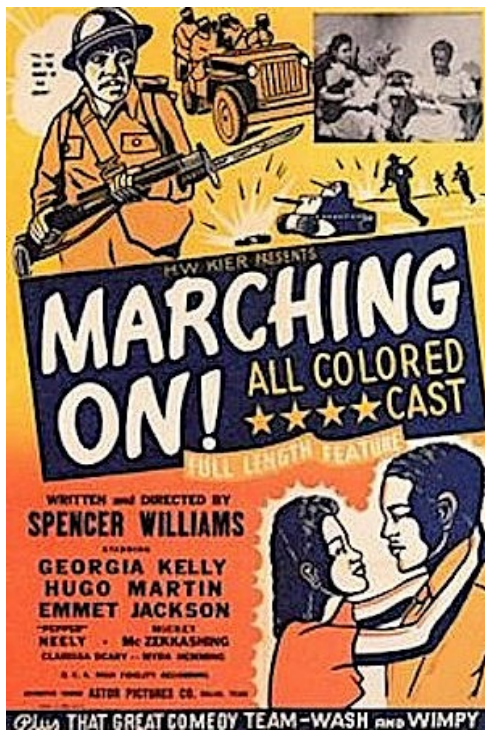
## The cinematic black soldier in the long civil rights era

*Militant Visions* begins with Reich's analysis of propagandistic World War II cinema produced by collaboration between Roosevelt's Office of War Information, Hollywood, and the NAACP. The films that emerged out of this collaboration—for instance, *Bataan*, *Sahara*, and *Stormy Weather*, all released in 1943—deployed the unprecedented figure of a dignified black soldier to elicit the participation of African Americans in the war. Reich points out that an overwhelming number of these black soldier films were set outside the United States. *Bataan*, for instance, was set in the Philippines and the construction of the black soldier as a strong, masculine figure and patriot required that he be carefully differentiated "from the 'savage'—who shows up ... as the Filipino figure of colonial backwardness" (43). This presentation, she observes, obscured not just "America's colonial and imperial presence in the Philippines since the mid-nineteenth-century Spanish-American War" but also kept "outside the frame the material exclusions suffered by black Americans and, in particular, black soldiers" (36) in a military that was yet to be integrated. On the whole, these films' black soldiers were "unprecedentedly powerful renderings of black men," Reich argues, but also reflections of "the government's carefully orchestrated cultural campaigns to redirect black anger from the nation toward global enemies" (3). These early films showed how the cinematic black soldier could be deployed to distract from both domestic racism and U.S. imperialism.

Beyond these mass-marketed films, the government- and independently produced films, *We've Come a Long, Long Way* (1943), *Marching On!* (1943), and *The Negro Soldier* (1944), were made with black audiences in mind, and were "direct exhortations to black Americans to participate in the war effort" (94) at a time when some black communities were "organizing *against* the war" (84). Interestingly, however, these were often internally contradictory texts that possessed the potential to also elicit against-the-grain readings from black audiences. Indeed, as Reich puts it, "part of the effectiveness of the black soldier was his polysemicity—that he could signify one set of meanings and goals for one constituent while also demonstrating a seemingly mutually exclusive set of affiliations and arguments to others" (15). The black soldier could invite participation in a racist and imperialist military, but this figure could also enable mobilizations against its racist and imperialist agendas.

Following World War II, as African American soldiers returned to a still segregated military in Jim Crow America, images of "African American patriots gave way to ambivalent and injured invalids who altered into angry and rebellious





Released alongside mass-marketed films like *Bataan* were propaganda films like *Marching On!* (1943), made by black artists and aimed at African American audiences. *Military Visions* argues that the figure of the black soldier in such films had the potential to identify spectators paradoxically with both war propaganda and black radicalism, at a time when the military was yet to be integrated.

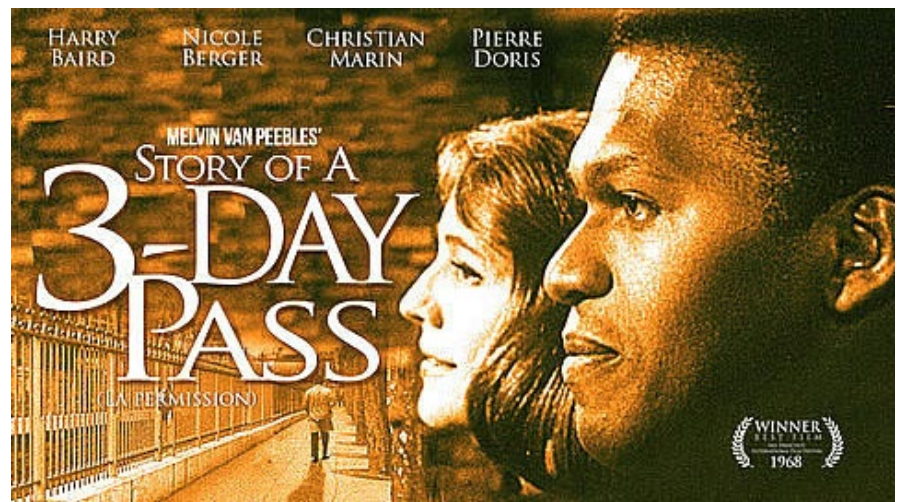


The psychosomatically paralyzed returning black soldier in the post-war film, *Home of the Brave* (1949). *Military Visions* offers a powerful critique of the limits of psychoanalysis in its reading of this resistant black soldier as embodiment of the nation's anxieties about racial integration.

nationalists" (14). In her powerful analysis of the 1949 film *Home of the Brave*, Reich reads "the psychosomatically paralyzed black soldier's illness and his stubborn refusals to submit to his treatment" as "a cinematic echo of Fanon's insistence that only by rejecting the terms of engagement—refusing the amputation of black sociopolitical life—can he escape his own paralysis" (125). By thus re-interpreting the significance of *Home of the Brave*'s resistant black soldier, Reich also offers an insightful critique of psychoanalysis's history of engagement with race.

Turning next to film production during the 1950s and 1960s civil rights struggle Reich notes that Hollywood filmmaking reflected little of this struggle or of the material realities of racial discrimination. Films about domestic racial tension were deemed too risky for Hollywood during the early Cold War period, so it was only with the waning of the civil rights and Black Power movements that cinematic renderings of the period's conflicts were produced. When describing 1970s Blaxploitation films such as Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) Reich argues that these independently produced re-significations of the black soldier "only appeared, and seemingly only *could* appear, after the leaders and energy of the resistance movements had passed" (158). Directors like Van Peebles had to rely on international rather than domestic circuits in order to make and also distribute films that effectively overturned Hollywood conventions of racial representation. In his first feature, *Story of a Three-Day Pass*, released in France in 1967 as *La Permission*, Van Peebles

"refuses the earlier, assimilationist representations of the black soldier that filled World War II-era and postwar cinema. Instead, he imagines this filmic figure—and the men it purports to represent—as damaged by life in America, fractured by institutionalized racism in the military, and, at the same time, liberated by his requisite ability to put on and take off a multiplicity of identities" (161).



Independently produced films by black artists re-signified the cinematic black soldier during the late 1960s and 1970s. In Melvin Van Peebles' *Story of a Three-Day Pass* (1967), the black soldier, stationed in Europe, is no longer an assimilationist, patriotic figure but rather one who is split geographically and psychically by the experience of U.S. racism.

In Ivan Dixon's 1973 film, *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, the black soldier no longer works towards integration and assimilation of African Americans within the US body politic; instead he appears as a militant whose "aim is to deliver black





In Ivan Dixon's *The Spook who Sat by the Door* (1973), the black soldier is transformed into a militant. Reich's reading emphasizes the film's affinities with the anticolonial politics of the Third Cinema of the 1970s.



The *New York Times* Op-Doc, *Transgender, at War and in Love* (2015), tells the story of this transgender couple, Logan and Laila, who are employed in the military but forced to conceal their identities owing to a ban on transgender enlistment. Films like this one, directed by Fiona Dawson, foreground the figure of the transgender soldier, a contemporary parallel to the cinematic black soldier that Reich historicizes.

Americans into freedom as a new people while forcing the United States to stop the war in Vietnam" (185). Reich reads this film as having "much in common with the anticolonial and revolutionary films of the Third Cinema, many of which were contemporaries of *Spook*" (187). It is not surprising, then, as Reich points out, that this film had very limited release in the United States until 2004, when the DVD was released for home distribution. Across this 1970s independent cinema, the black soldier appears no longer as representative of a racially integrated military—whose performance of inclusion domestically acts as cover for its violence abroad—but rather as critic of the logic of assimilation within a racist and imperialist state.

## The transgender soldier and minority integration in contemporary film

Reich's tracking of the various incarnations of the cinematic black soldier allows us to understand this figure as a transnational one—part of not just civil rights struggles within the United States but also government efforts at constructing an imperialist identity abroad. Or, to put it slightly differently, the book offers insight into how domestic racism and racialized modes of seeing—that are deployed first to deny full citizenship rights to minority groups and then to make inclusion contingent on their performance of patriotism—play a crucial role in enabling the project of expanding U.S. interests abroad. *Military Visions*' history of the cinematic black soldier allows readers to view the military from a critical distance, for being a powerful institution within the United States and also one whose policies, both of discrimination and minority inclusion, have enormous implications abroad, especially for those who are the targets of U.S. imperialist wars.

This attentiveness to the interconnectedness between the U.S. military's domestic and international roles is invaluable today in the context of the ongoing War on Terror, and in light of the fact that the dominant tendency within even discussions on the Left is to ignore the military's international violence and focus singularly on its potential to spearhead domestic social change through its admission of discriminated groups. Indeed, in recent public discussion about the inclusion of minority service members, the impact of the U.S. military's actions abroad is rarely brought into view, nor are the intrinsic links between domestic exclusion and U.S. imperialism acknowledged.[6] Reich's analysis of the cinematic black soldier sensitizes us to these links between the military's domestic and international violence, thereby opening up a new way of analyzing the present.

Specifically, *Military Visions* offers a valuable lens through which to view liberal responses to the government's ban on transgender military service, where the promise of inclusion can occlude consideration of the military's domestic context as well as its international implications. Consider, for instance, a short documentary from 2015, *Transgender, at War and in Love* that was developed into a feature-length film, *Transmilitary*, released in 2018. The short film, commissioned as an Op-Doc by the *New York Times*, explored "the challenges of a transgender military couple, who are banned from serving openly." [7] One of the *Times*' most viewed Op-Docs, it was nominated for an Emmy, leading director, Fiona Dawson [8] to co-direct the feature-length version.

*Transmilitary*, which includes within it material from the original Op-Doc, played in film festivals and also on Logo TV. Interestingly, the feature-length film's promotional webpage [9] features prominently the image of a saluting African American transgender soldier (El Cook, one of the film's protagonists) alongside a caption that reads, "Over 15,000 U.S. transgender troops defend our freedom while fighting for their own." In other words, the film's publicity explicitly invokes the cinematic black soldier that Reich's book historicizes, prompting the viewer to see the current struggle for transgender rights as the latest chapter in a much longer struggle for minority inclusion in the U.S. military [10].



*Transgender, at War and in Love* was re-made as a feature-length documentary, *Transmilitary* (2018). The black transgender soldier on the film's promotional webpage is a visual echo of the cinematic black soldier and a cue to the viewer to think about the struggle for transgender inclusion as the latest iteration of the civil rights struggle.

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



*Transgender, at War and in Love*, like *Bataan*, legitimizes the transgender soldier by emphasizing his muscular torso.

As in the World War II films Reich discusses, military service becomes crucial for humanizing those who are otherwise deemed ineligible for full citizenship rights within the United States. Furthermore, these contemporary films make a powerful parallel to films like *Bataan* by foregrounding the muscularity and patriotism of the transgender soldier while placing in the background the sites (and stories) of U.S. military intervention.

For instance, *Transgender, at War and in Love* opens with shots that emphasize the muscular body of Logan Ireland, a transgender senior airman in the U.S. air force deployed in Kandahar. The showcasing of the soldier's masculine body serves a double function. As in *Bataan*, it establishes his worthiness to serve in the military; but additionally, it is crucial for challenging the military's refusal to accept the truth about Logan's identity, forcing him to remain "closeted" as he transitions. The film's showcasing of Logan's body keeps the viewer focused on his physicality as he goes through shooting practice in Afghanistan, or as he mingles with Afghan children, or as he talks via video chat with his fiancée, Laila Villanueva, a transgender woman employed in the U.S. Army and stationed in Hawai'i.



Logan's muscular body is in the foreground; meanwhile the landscape of Kandahar, Afghanistan forms the backdrop for his story, narrated here through the film's intertitles.

Whenever we see shots of Kandahar, they are invariably from Logan's point of view, so that the mountainous landscape and dusty streets serve as no more than B-roll for Logan's voiceover commentary, or as backdrop for the film's intertitles describing Logan's precarious position in the military.



Afghanistan is inevitably seen only from a distance and through the military vehicle that Logan drives. The details of ordinary life in Afghanistan and the story of America's

In the second part of the film, Afghanistan fades from view as Logan returns to the lush environment of the southern United States, successfully comes out to his superior, and gains permission to follow male military dress and hair regulations. Within this visibly different domestic context, we see the couple getting married, as Laila declares in a moving address to the viewer, "We are people too, you know. We live our life and we get married, just like anybody else. And we want kids and we want a house." In its final moments, the film returns to the backdrop of war-torn Afghanistan as Logan— seen in a military vehicle with an U.S. flag above him — makes an appeal to viewers to "please change your opinion on others like me" and to not discharge transgender troops because these are "good people for the military." Like the black soldier's performance of patriotism in the World War II films Reich discusses, visual and auditory reminders of the transgender soldier's



involvement in the region are kept outside the frame—just as *Bataan* kept outside the frame the history of U.S. imperialism in the Philippines.



The U.S. flag establishes the transgender soldier's patriotism and further legitimizes his demand for inclusion within the military.

patriotism are crucial for legitimizing his plea for inclusion in the military.

*Transmilitary* expands on this narrative of Logan and Laila's lives, while also including two other active duty transgender soldiers: El Cook— featured prominently on the film's website— and Jenn Peace. As in the short film, the warscapes of Afghanistan— and also Iraq, where El is deployed— remain in the background while we focus on the soldiers' physical strength, patriotism, and efforts at collectively organizing to end the ban on transgender service. If Laila and Logan's marriage provides closure to the short film, here closure is also provided by images of El Cook's and Jenn Peace's nuclear families. The presence of the transgender soldiers' partners and children conjures up a sense of "normal" family life that further legitimizes their demand for equal rights. The film ends by showing the soldiers' reactions to the lifting of the ban in late 2016, during the final days of the Obama administration—followed by their expressions of renewed anxiety surrounding the ban's reinstatement under President Trump. In the film's final moments we learn that four lawsuits have challenged the President's directive and placed a temporary pause on the new ban; however, the situation remains unresolved.

Both films, told from the perspective of transgender military personnel, make a powerful and moving argument about why this discrimination is not just unjust but also illogical, given that it denies the military access to highly competent and willing service members. On the one hand, these films call attention to the transphobia in the U.S. military and therefore have the potential to shift regressive social attitudes. On the other hand, their scenes of minority inclusion — like parallel scenes in the early black soldier films —obscure the humanity of those who are the targets of U.S. military actions abroad. Just as *Bataan* kept the US's racist imperialism in the Philippines outside the frame, *Transgender, at War and in Love* and *Transmilitary* keep outside the frame the daily struggles of Afghans who have been living under conditions of perpetual war for the last eighteen years. If in *Bataan* the Philippines functioned as backdrop for U.S. military self-promotion as an open and racially mixed institution, here Afghanistan—and its distance from the United States—becomes the condition of possibility for forging the image of a new, potentially progressive, trans-inclusive military.

Also kept out of the frame is the plight of ordinary transgender people in the United States and the economic context to their military enlistment. In this regard, too, these contemporary films resemble the early black soldier films that erased all signs of domestic racism. Intertitles within *Transgender, at War and in Love* tell us that "Logan is one of an estimated 15, 500 transgender people serving in the United States military," and that "transgender people are twice as likely to serve as their fellow citizens." Similarly, *Transmilitary* opens by informing the viewer that "the U.S. military [is] the largest employer of transgender people in America." However, neither the short film nor the feature-length version explores why transgender people are more likely than others to serve in the military or why it is that the military is the largest employer of transgender people within the United States.

Addressing these questions would mean having to acknowledge, first, the systemic vulnerability of transgender people, who are disproportionately poor, underemployed, and according to the ACLU, "subject to some of the highest rates of bullying, harassment, hate crimes, discrimination, and suicide;" [11] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] and second, the military's provision of healthcare, education, and social support in a nation that continually weakens the state's capacity to provide social welfare to disenfranchised groups.

*Transmilitary* does include a few moments that hint at this material context to transgender enlistment: for instance, Captain Jenn Peace describes how she joined the military to get her "life in track"—after becoming homeless as a high school drop-out with an abusive father and nowhere else to go. We see photos and



video footage of Jenn at target practice while he hear her speak of how much she loves the military because it has given her a home and made her into someone who is “responsible for all of the intelligence collection and analysis within [an] infantry battalion of 400 soldiers.” In other words, this brief insight into the material conditions prompting Jenn’s enlistment functions as part of a narrative that celebrates the military as a means to upward mobility. In the process, the viewer is left little room to consider the implications of a domestic social context where the state’s role in providing social welfare has been so weakened that military service is the only option left to someone in Jenn’s situation.

On the whole, these contemporary films rely on the currency of a post-9/11 discourse that glorifies the military as a vital social and ethical force, with little regard for the violence it perpetrates globally, or for how increased military expenditure comes at the expense of social welfare spending. Just as the patriotic black soldier in the Philippines distracted from the histories and material realities of both domestic racism and U.S. imperialism, the figure of the muscular transgender soldier in Afghanistan obscures the histories and realities of domestic transphobia and also U.S. imperialist wars. In a telling moment that occurs in both films, Logan declares to the camera,

Logan confesses that the “austere environment” of Afghanistan is a “vacation” for a soldier like himself who struggles to gain recognition in the United States. The film, however, fails to explore the domestic context of transgender vulnerability that makes military enlistment a desirable option. Instead, it celebrates the military as especially poised to create progressive social change.

“What I like about this deployment is that I can be my authentic self. I’m just another guy whereas back home I’m still seen as female. I go by female regs and standards. Here in Afghanistan, a war zone, it’s like a vacation to me because I can be myself in such an austere environment.”

The “austere environment”—visible only as backdrop—functions not to raise questions about why Afghanistan is impoverished and war-torn, or what domestic circumstances prompt an American soldier to perceive war as a “vacation,” but rather as a catalyst for the legitimization of the transgender soldier’s authentic gender identity, and, eventually, his integration within the domestic public sphere.

## Debating the military in Trump’s United States

Following President Trump’s executive orders in 2017, lawmakers invoked a post-9/11 discourse of U.S. militarism to urge the administration to protect immigrant service members threatened with deportation. Whereas some celebrated the patriotism of these service members, others more pragmatically pointed out that foreign nationals possessed medical and linguistic skills that were deemed “vital to the success of military operations but in short supply among U.S.-born troops.”[12] In a similar manner, following President Trump’s announcement about banning transgender service members, Democrats, Republicans, as well as LGBT and transgender rights groups— some of whom had collaborated with the military in recent years to draft anti-discrimination policy— rejected the proposed ban by defending the patriotism, loyalty, bravery, and honor of transgender service members.[13] More nakedly pragmatic concerns were then exposed when senators,[14] veterans[15], and others argued that the ban and executive orders would hurt “military readiness.” If Hollywood’s construction of the black soldier as patriot disavowed the military’s need for more willing bodies on the battlefield, then present-day invocations of the bravery of immigrant and transgender soldiers repress the military’s dependence on the service of soldiers from disadvantaged and impoverished, minority communities.



*Transgender, at War and in Love* featured as part of a debate between the film’s director, Fiona Dawson (left), and transgender rights activist and scholar, Dean Spade (right). Spade feared that the figure of the transgender soldier was being instrumentalized within a war between the political Left and Right around President Trump’s new ban on transgender military service, without care for what is most needed for the health and wellbeing of the transgender population. Spade’s comments suggest that the transgender soldier, like the black soldier, is being deployed to deflect scrutiny away from the economic and physical violence suffered by transgender Americans and also from the U.S. government’s devastation of areas in the Middle East and South Asia.

The broader transgender community has, not surprisingly, had mixed responses to President Trump’s ban. In fact, segments from *Transgender, At War and in Love* played as part of a 2017 debate on *Democracy Now!* between the film’s director, Fiona Dawson, and transgender scholar and activist, Dean Spade. Bringing up aspects not mentioned in her short film, Dawson pointed out that, “the military is a very important employer and a way [for transgender service members to provide] for their families, [be] able to access healthcare, be able to access housing and be able to live the life that most Americans want to live.” Dawson noted, “trans people are twice as likely to be unemployed, and yet twice as likely to join the military.” However, she emphasized, “the debate about imperialism and whether we should have a military should be taken outside of the debate about whether trans people should be able to serve or not.” She argued that most of the transgender service members she has met have joined the military out of choice rather than coercion, and hence “the issue that we need to focus on, is the equal opportunity in this country to be able to serve in the military.”

Dean Spade, on the other hand, questioned “the idea that ... you should have to join the military to get basic housing, health services and employment.” Moreover, Spade expressed concern about “the ways in which this debate gets pitched... [with] trans people on one side, usually framed as ... willing soldiers with absolutely no critique of U.S. military imperialism or of the U.S. military as an extremely exploitative and abandoning employer.” Mentioning his work with transgender veterans left without access to healthcare and benefits, Spade argued,

“[W]hen we lose our critique of militarism and of the U.S. military in this debate, what happens, ... is that trans people become sort of a



symbolic space in which to have basically pro-military advocacy and PR.... And it rebrands the military as a site of liberation and progressive politics, which it's fundamentally not. The U.S. military... is... one of the largest sources of violence on the planet Earth.”

According to Spade, both the Right and Left tend to instrumentalize transgender people within these debates. As he put it, “both the left and the right uses the ... controversial figure of trans people to their political expediency, but without actually getting into what trans people really need most.” The Right uses trans people as a moral issue to stir up fear whereas the Left, including politicians and people in the military itself, use the issue to come off as progressive. Spade therefore raised the question, “How can we have a more complex conversation about the fact that, yes, trans people are poor and underemployed and need real jobs, but their option should not be one of the most dangerous and exploitative jobs possible.” “That’s not actually, I think, what a trans collective liberation is actually about,” he added.[16]

Like Spade, formerly imprisoned transgender soldier Chelsea Manning responded to Trump’s announcement by bringing into view the military’s domestic as well as international role. It is important to note that the transgender ban was proposed at the same time that Congress considered a proposed \$54 billion increase to the government’s already massive defense budget.[17] On Twitter, Manning called attention to the contradiction that the world’s most highly funded military “cries about a few trans people but funds the F-35.” In another provocative tweet, Manning then proposed that “today is further reason we should dismantle the bloated and dangerous military/intel/police state to fund #healthcare for all#”[18]—thereby exposing how massive military spending occurs at the expense of public spending on healthcare for all.

Thus, just as the 1970s independent black filmmakers challenged the assimilationist framework of World War II depictions of the black soldier, transgender activists like Manning and Spade offer us alternative frameworks to the dominant discourse of minority rights through inclusion and participation in the imperialist military-industrial-complex.

Since coming to office, Donald Trump has raised the military budget, cut public spending, called for further escalation of troop levels in Afghanistan,[19] then abruptly reduced troop levels,[20] all of which has essentially ensured the continuation of an eighteen-year-long war that has eviscerated Afghan society. It is becoming clear that prolonging war abroad enables the U.S. government to distract from urgent domestic problems—such as ongoing economic decline, increasing class inequality, and the rise of a militant and violent far Right. Within this context, *Military Visions*’ history of the ideological labor performed by the cinematic black soldier offers a helpful reminder of how media representations that defend minority integration, without questioning U.S. militarism, cover up — even if unwittingly— the egregious crimes and human rights violations committed by the United States. As the transgender rights movement gains momentum, *Military Visions*’ parallel history of the U.S. anti-racist struggle prompts us to actively imagine what it would mean to represent the interests of minority soldiers in order to challenge not just lack of integration in the military but also the political economy and ideological apparatus of a capitalist and imperialist state.

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## Notes

1. Drawing on Nikhil Pal Singh, Reich refers to the period between World War II and the end of the Vietnam War as the “long civil rights movement” (5). See Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2005.

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2. Donovan Harrell, “Truman ended military racial segregation exactly 69 years before Trump’s transgender ban,” *The Olympian*, July 26, 2017.  
<http://www.theolympian.com/news/politics-government/article163689298.html>

In January 2019, the Supreme Court permitted the President’s ban on transgender military personnel to go into effect. The ban apparently makes exceptions for those who are already serving openly as transgender soldiers as well as those said to be serving “in their biological sex.” Adam Lipstek, “Supreme Court Revives Transgender Ban for Military Service,” *The New York Times*, Jan 22, 2019. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/22/us/politics/transgender-ban-military-supreme-court.html>)

3. This question of minority inclusion in the military also came up after President Trump signed executive orders that put families of immigrant service members—once protected under a “Parole in Place” program—at risk of deportation. The administration subsequently started considering termination of a program that offered a fast track to citizenship for foreign nationals who served in the U.S. military. See Nathan Fletcher, “Trump order drops protection for families of deployed military,” *San Diego Union Tribune*, Feb 24, 2017 (<http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/opinion/commentary/sd-utbg-trump-military-deport-fletcher-20170224-story.html>) and “Trump Administration Considers End to Citizenship for Military Service Program,” *National Public Radio*, “Morning Edition,” July 12, 2017 (<http://www.npr.org/2017/07/12/536781978/trump-administration-considers-end-to-citizenship-for-military-service-program>).

4. According to Brown University’s Costs of War project (<https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/>), over 480,000 people have been killed in the United States’ post-9/11 wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan —and these figures do not include “indirect deaths” caused by “loss of access to food, water, health facilities, electricity or other infrastructure” (2). See Neta C. Crawford, “Human Cost of the Post-9/11 Wars: Lethality and the Need for Transparency,” Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs, Brown University, November 2018: <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2018/Human%20Costs%2C%20Nov%208%202018%20CoW.pdf>

5. Robert Stam, “Mobilizing Fictions: The Gulf War, the Media and the Recruitment of the Spectator. *Public Culture* 4.2 (Spring 1992): 101-126. Stam uses the phrase “military-industrial-media-complex” to talk about the increasing absorption during the first Gulf War of the media as well as the average televisual spectator within the U.S. military’s political and ideological agenda.

6. Even academic publications on minority inclusion in the military tend to focus



on the domestic politics of race, gender, and sexuality at the exclusion of the military's international role and function. Consider, for instance, *Integrating the US Military: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation Since World War II* (Eds. Douglas Walter Bristol, Jr. and Heather Marie Stur, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017). This edited volume explores various sorts of discrimination within the military and how military personnel have played dominant roles in domestic civil rights struggles. This examination excludes consideration of the military's international presence and of America's imperialist politics, more generally, in the past and present.

7. *Transgender, at War and in Love*, Dir. Fiona Dawson, *New York Times*, June 4, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/100000003720527/transgender-at-war-and-in-love.html?mcubz=1https://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/100000003720527/transgender-at-war-and-in-love.html?mcubz=1>

8. See Dawson's profile on <https://www.freelionproductions.com/about/>

9. See the film's official website— <http://www.transmilitary.org>

10. This African American service member, Captain El Cook, is the least developed of the four protagonists of *Transmilitary*. Even the film's trailer (available on <http://www.transmilitary.org>) relies more heavily on the power of his *image* rather than on his words. Whereas we see talking heads of the other three soldiers, it is Cook's image that dominates—suggestive of how his image functions as a potent metonym for the history of minority inclusion in the military. By treating Cook's image as metonymic, the film suggests a parallel between black soldiers of an earlier era and transgender soldiers of today. In the process, the particular vulnerability of the black transgender soldier is eclipsed as his experience is folded into the broader category of "transmilitary." For more on this tendency to uncritically equate black and white soldiers' experiences within cinematic representation, see Hannah Graves, "'Coward, take my coward's hand': *Mudbound* (2017) and the legacy of Hollywood's anti-racist returning veteran films." *U.S. Studies Online*, 2018. <http://www.baas.ac.uk/usso/coward-take-my-cowards-hand-mudbound-2017-and-the-legacy-of-hollywoods-anti-racist-returning-veteran-films/>

11. "Stop Trump's Ban on Transgender Military Service," ACLU Action, August 24, 2017. <https://action.aclu.org/secure/trans-military-ban> [return to page 2]

12. Alex Horton, "Honor our contract: Lawmakers press Trump not to deport foreign-born military recruits," *The Washington Post*, June 28, 2017. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/06/28/honor-our-contract-lawmakers-press-trump-not-to-deport-foreign-born-military-recruits/?utm\\_term=.f16ac2f22d87](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/06/28/honor-our-contract-lawmakers-press-trump-not-to-deport-foreign-born-military-recruits/?utm_term=.f16ac2f22d87))

13. See statements by transgender groups in Sophie Tatum, "White House to issue guidance on transgender military ban, WSJ reports," *CNN*, August 24, 2017 (<http://www.cnn.com/2017/08/23/politics/white-house-memo-transgender-military-ban/index.html>) and Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "Military Transgender Ban to Begin Within 6 Months, Memo Says," *New York Times*, August 23, 2017 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/23/us/politics/trump-military-transgender-ban.html>)

14. Democratic senator Tammy Duckworth expressed concerns about military readiness and argued that Congress members needed to draft legislation to prevent the ban from taking effect. See Alex Ward, "Trump's ban on transgender troops will soon be policy. Here's what happens next," *Vox*, August 25, 2017 (<https://www.vox.com/world/2017/8/25/16196340/transgender-military-ban-trump-white-house-pentagon>).

15. Fifty six retired generals and admirals argued that the ban would "deprive the military of mission-critical talent." See Rebecca Shapiro, "White House Gearing

Up to Push Transgender Military Ban Forward,” *Huffington Post*, August 24, 2017: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/white-house-transgender-military-ban-forward\\_us\\_599e427be4b05710aa59b31d](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/white-house-transgender-military-ban-forward_us_599e427be4b05710aa59b31d).

16. “What Role Should the Military Play in the Fight for Transgender Rights?” *Democracy Now!* July 27, 2017. [https://www.democracynow.org/2017/7/27/what\\_role\\_should\\_the\\_military\\_play](https://www.democracynow.org/2017/7/27/what_role_should_the_military_play)

17. Jessica Taylor, Danielle Kurtzleben, Scott Horsley, “Trump Unveils ‘Hard Power’ Budget that Boosts Military Spending,” *National Public Radio*, “All Things Considered,” March 16, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/2017/03/16/520305293/trump-to-unveil-hard-power-budget-that-boosts-military-spending>.

18. See Manning’s original tweets in Hayley Miller, “Chelsea Manning Responds to Donald Trump’s Tweets About Banning Transgender Service Members,” *Huffington Post*, July 26, 2017. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/chelsea-manning-donald-trump-military-transgender\\_us\\_5978959fe4b0a8a40e84234d](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/chelsea-manning-donald-trump-military-transgender_us_5978959fe4b0a8a40e84234d)

19 David Nakamura and Abby Phillip, “Trump announces new strategy for Afghanistan that calls for a troop increase,” *Washington Post*, August 21, 2017. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-expected-to-announce-small-troop-increase-in-afghanistan-in-prime-time-address/2017/08/21/eb3a513e-868a-11e7-a94f-3139abce39f5\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.5649e3e2bbbd](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-expected-to-announce-small-troop-increase-in-afghanistan-in-prime-time-address/2017/08/21/eb3a513e-868a-11e7-a94f-3139abce39f5_story.html?utm_term=.5649e3e2bbbd))

20. Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Mujib Mashal, “U.S. to Withdraw About 7,000 Troops from Afghanistan, Officials Say,” *The New York Times*, Dec 20, 2018. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/20/us/politics/afghanistan-troop-withdrawal.html>)

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Visitors to *Parole Him* are met with a GIF teasing the abuse records hosted on the site. The parolee's asshole is censored meanwhile signs of the abuse of the two parole officers remains visible: inclusive of the officer's dick posed for penetration (shown in this image) and a rear wristlock. The implication being that accepting the site terms and entering also means entry into parolees and appreciation for/(participation in) their abuse. ...



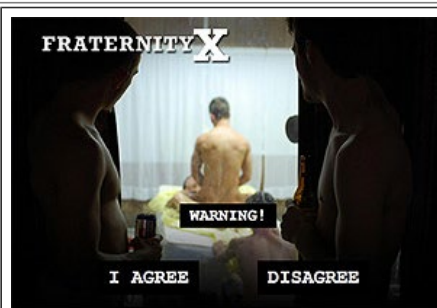
... An uncensored version from the same animated image appears in a banner advertisement for the site that reiterates the abuse theme on offer: "violated parole" (a double entendre).



## Gay pornography, in-custody abuse and the CCTV POV

by [Joseph Brennan](#)

*Parole Him*[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)] is a gay pornographic website started in 2012. It claims to host found footage documenting the criminal exploits of nine Florida State Parole Officers who sexually abused male parolees and, "most disturbing of all, [...] recorded everything on video using a sophisticated network of surveillance and cameras." [2] Here I wish to consider how such a presentation achieves a pleasurable 'fuckable felon' fantasy, while also reading the site in line with 'surveillance aesthetics.' Such a fantasy and aesthetic is evident both in the twenty-two preview recordings hosted on the site, and in the marketing (including banner advertisements and video descriptions) that accompany these so-called 'found' recordings. Elsewhere [3] I analyze two pornographic sites from the same creator as *Parole Him* – *Fraternity X* [4] and *Sketchy Sex*, [5] devoted to college hazing and sex addiction fantasies, respectively. In this earlier work I argue for the need to consider the breadth of the sites' offering through textual analysis of "all publicly available video previews, descriptions, titles, and images hosted on both sites [...]" and from marketing materials." [6] Such inclusion is important, I wrote, in order to "construct a meaningful and accurate analysis" of both sites. [7]



The landing pages for *Parole Him*'s even more popular sister sites present similar voyeuristic viewing propositions to audiences. *Fraternity X* through its shadowy, beer-carrying hazers watching from a position of concealment ...



... and *Sketchy Sex* through the faceless line of men standing before a sex addict's presented anus with the double entendre slogan "Seed of Addiction" top right and an "enter" button across the addict's waiting hole. Identification with the perspectives of abuse perpetrators (of hazing and use of sex addicts) is encouraged.

I adopt a similar approach in the present article, accounting for all twenty-two video preview recordings hosted on *Parole Him* and using textual analysis to read these recordings together with the promotional materials that support them. Textual analysis is a qualitative method in which I strategically select particular aspects of the sites' overall output so as to uncover strategies of representation. I identify the scenes in the endnotes using the sites' own reference codes [8] and limit my analysis to all publicly available video previews, descriptions, titles, images, and banner advertisements. (I confined the analysis to all publicly



The *Parole Him* main page banner heads the site's content. The U.S. flag, images of sex between young men and uniformed officers, the site's "Either way, they're fucked" slogan with a white male silhouette over iron bars (read: insider perspective), and signifiers of CCTV footage added to the sex images conjures narratives of U.S. police brutality, male prison rape, and persistent surveillance.



As part of its marketing, *Parole Him* makes certain claims to 'the real'. It promises "real recordings" of sex crimes ...



... and justifies the release of this footage as in the public interest. And always, with a call to action for us to watch (click here!).

viewable content in the interests of accessibility for readers and to make my analysis more relevant for a wider audience – beyond those who might be inclined to subscribe to the site.[9])

*Parole Him* offers voyeuristic pleasures. It adopts the 'surveillance gaze'[10] and certain 'archival effects'[11] as visual and narrative techniques that court a realistic 'gay abuse porn' fantasy. Both the videos and the marketing of *Parole Him* invite audiences to adopt a form of 'CCTV POV.' Also, the site taps into on-going interest – both in gay culture and more broadly – in the attractive male felon, and it exploits this interest through a fantasy that the viewer sees documentary evidence of the abuse of 'fuckable felons.' The 'fuckable felon' is defined here as an attractive, ostensibly straight male – convicted of a crime and incarcerated – that an audience would be interested in seeing 'get fucked' by a man or men in a prison or prison-related setting. Although the site claims that the fictional perpetrators of the crimes captured by the surveillance cameras have been "arrested and charged,"[13] the hosting of these videos allows the fantasy abuse to continue from the spectatorial position. This view is in line with the site's own marketing: *Parole Him*'s slogan reads: "either way, they're fucked."

Here I hope to contribute to scholarship on gay abuse porn through the exploration of institutional-abuse-in-incarceration-settings scenarios, in particular by developing my concepts of fuckable felons and CCTV POV. To demonstrate the relevance of these concepts to gay porn more generally, I also look at a number of other sites belonging to the in-custody abuse porn genre in varying degrees of detail. The sites are, in order of inclusion (and in descending degree of detail): *Czech Gay Fantasy*, *Young Perps*, *Gay Patrol*, *Strip Search Hell*, *Guys in Lockup*, *Iron Lockup*, *Jail Lust*, and *Str8 Hell's Airport Security* and *Young Offenders* series. I read these additional case studies *in situ* with *Parole Him*, hopefully adding further depth to the article's central claims while also plotting out some possible future research directions.

## Narratives of parolee abuse on *Parole Him*

*Parole Him* purports to host documentary evidence – "featured on this website" and obtained "in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) 5 U.S.C"[14] – of the real abusive exploits of parole officers over the men placed in their care. The site, produced by Mike Gilbert, stopped adding new content sometime in 2013. Gilbert also created 'gonzo' (characterized by use of the hand-held camera) reality gay porn sites *Fraternity X* and *Sketchy Sex*. [15] According to Gilbert, *Parole Him* failed to gain audience share[16] akin to *Fraternity X* and *Sketchy Sex* due in part to its niche and also to its execution[17]. But it remains as evidence of the currency of the prison and law enforcement setting as a site for homoerotic intrigue[18] as well as of the erotic potential of surveillance technology. It is those two factors that I will explore here.

There are a number of abuse narratives enacted across *Parole Him*. Four themes are of special interest, namely: threat of prison, gay-sex-as-rehabilitation, threat of exportation, and straight-to-gay motifs. Each of these narratives provides evidence of the site's position within the abuse porn genre while also serving as a useful introduction to its various tropes and styles. The first of these is the most straightforward. Parole officers who meet with parolees following a prison sentence are in a position of power and influence. Threatening to return these attractive felons to prison would unsurprisingly create powerful incentive, especially given that popular myth – a 'myth' that is not entirely removed from reality (as I go on to discuss) – tells us these men may have already fallen victim to sexual assault during their initial prison sentence. This incentive is so powerful in fact, that parolees often adopt an attitude of, to quote one parolee, "there's gotta be something I can do." Such a narrative may have prisoners offer sexual favors in exchange for freedom even before parole officers are revealed to be morally corrupt/able.[19] To quote further from the same video preview: "I'll do anything. [...] Anything, anything at all. I cannot go back." [20] Officers exploit

parolees' desperation not to return to prison in this pornographic fantasy, as the following excerpts demonstrate:

- [VO][Parolee:] "Don't make me go back to jail." [Officer:] "Yeah? Take that cock." [21]
- [TEXT] "Officer Thompson threatened to return him to prison on false drug trafficking allegations. Mose had to choose between a two year prison sentence or getting fucked by his Parole Officer!" [22]
- [TEXT] "They considered to send him to prison for the rest of his life. The 29 year old 'fuck up' worried for his freedom, and submitted completely to the Officers." [23]
- [VO][Officer:] "You do what we tell you, we'll keep you out of fucking prison. We own you." [24]



In the series threat of prison serves as powerful incentive to get straight parolees to submit to gay sex. ...



... And sexual submission is often achieved via class and age difference that serves as effective intimidation ...



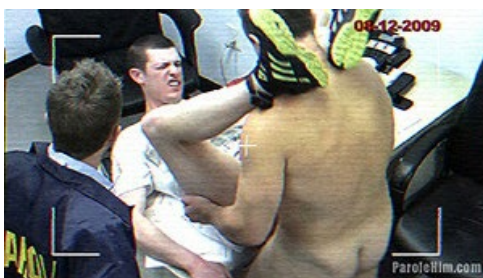
... and dominance that is frequently visualized by difficulty accommodating the daddy dick ...



... manhandling, dehumanizing, and often aggressive penetration of often smaller bodies, ...



... and at times a kind of madness on behalf of the officers-turned-criminals, who turn the parolees in their care into fuckable objects in crazed performances. They often delight in displaying their fuck-meat-spoils for the surveillance camera – in this image, the badge, a symbol of authority, is poised to itself penetrate the anus that is being roughly prepared.



In addition to the more 'straightforward' threat of prison time, these excerpts suggest the distinct domination and objectification that leads to abuse from the powerful (law enforcers) over the powerless (offenders) – "we own you." A more sinister narrative I observed across the site is a gay-sex-as-rehabilitation narrative; this also relies on the privileged position of the fantasy abusers. Such a narrative is intelligible when considered within the discipline trope of gay culture, but also the familiar 'daddy persona' in gay porn.[25] In certain scenes, sex is imposed on parolees as a form of correctional sentencing. In one video preview, for instance, the parolee promises that if the abuse stops he will not reoffend – "I don't want to do it anymore. I won't do anything bad ever again. Promise." In another the parolee, while anally penetrated without a condom, issues an apology



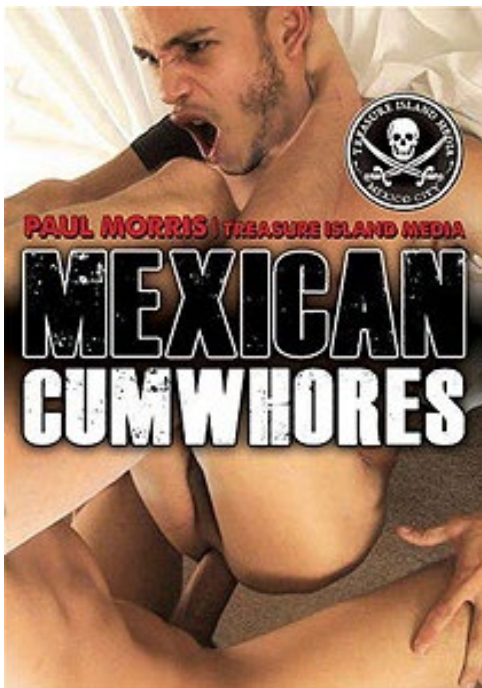
The parolees are often presented as young and white ...



... but young immigrants are another popular abuse object. Immigrants like Rafeal Mendoza are presented as having language difficulties and as fearful of American law-enforcement ...



... and these men are therefore easily coerced into gay sex acts by threats of exportation.



Titles like Treasure Island Media's *Mexican Cumwhores* (2015) stand in the present of Trump's U.S. as symbols of the fuckability and 'fucked' perception of Mexican men in U.S.-centric media (like gay porn).

– “[Officer:] You’ve been a bad boy, real bad. [Parolee:] I’m sorry.”[27] Other examples include forced anal intercourse imposed on parolees as a form of disciplinary action, following a failed urine drug test or general “punk on parole” behavior – such as meeting [TEXT] “with his Parole Officer wearing sunglasses, and chewing gum.”[30]

The parolees are presented in line with race and class, namely as [TEXT] “poor white trash.”[31] In the text the parolees of *Parole Him* are often depicted as “poor [and] unfortunate” men who “could only hope for a quick pounding” and were “not allowed to leave until [an] Officer [...] had unloaded his ejaculate into [the] young felon’s hole.”[32] And the site frequently exploits racial reference, especially as it intersects with class. In this respect the site propagates certain exploitation narratives where the depiction of ethnic minorities (i.e., immigrants) feature prominently.

A “young immigrant” parolee,[33] for example, is described in the video preview as a “fucking hot Mexican.” Here the summary for the incident is good illustration of the exploitative fantasy on offer:

“[TEXT] The Officers used their power and control over poor and helpless immigrants like Rafeal Mendoza. The poor immigrant was not in a position to fight them, having to do as the Officers say and sucked his 9 inch cock, then taking it up the ass.”[34]

In this case the immigrant is “poor and helpless,” in no “position to fight” the “power and control” of “The Officers,” eventually submitting to the abuse and “taking it up the ass.” The officers force young immigrant parolees to “comply” by threatening to report their “undocumented family to Immigration and Customs Enforcement.”[35] “Comply” means sexual submission, and this coercion is often shown in degrading and racist displays.

For instance, in another video preview one of the officers says to the parolee while handling his own penis, “[VO][Officer:] Your mother’s an illegal. She’s going home. [...] Come on, sucky sucky. Get down here and suck my cock.” When the parolee complies, dropping to his knees and fellating the officer’s penis, he stops mid-act to plead: “Please, no immigration, no, no my mother, please.” To which the officer replies: “You’ve gotta keep sucking that cock then.” (At time of writing [across 2017–2019], such portrayals of hot illegal Mexicans could not be detached from Trump’s presidency and the resurgence in anti-Mexican sentiment in his political rhetoric; such a connection demonstrates how shifting contexts of viewing and the spectator’s country of origin can influence perceptions of the content itself – the radical texts of Treasure Island Media’s Mexican film imprint MECOS [Mexican-Spanish slang for semen] strikes me as another example: though it claims to celebrate Mexican cum-filled man-fuckers, its fetishistic American-pornographer-in-Mexico lens seems more objectifying than anything else and, in my viewing at least, results in texts that are intruded upon by questions of potential exploitation.)

Other problematic depictions of race exist on the site.[37] Almost exclusively officers penetrate parolees so that anal penetration functions as a form of degradation and abuse.[38] Uniquely in one scene a parolee is instructed to penetrate an officer. Here the parolee is Black, his crime is “possession with intent to distribute” and the scene is titled “the Drug Dealer.” In the video preview, the officer explains that to stay out of prison the parolee must have “a big cock in those pants” and “do a good job” when penetrating him. Here the video seems clearly to rely on a homo-thug stereotype and “racialized fetishism” consistent with dominant representations of Black performers in gay porn.[39]







Generally it is the officers that penetrate the underclass parolees. Except in the case of a Black man, who in 'the Deal' is made to penetrate, as is keeping with homo-thug stereotypes and "racialized fetishism" of Black performers in gay porn.



Straight parolees often display disgust at the gay acts that the parole officers make them perform. Expressions that are similar to those seen across other str8-to-gay sites.



Cash is coupled with penetration as sites like *Str8 Chaser* ...



... and *Czech Hunter* play up the fantasy of every straight guy as purchasable at a price, the latter of which has an especially exploitative edge. Notice the POV shot, which invites the viewer to exchange his own cash and fuck these straight boys himself.



In 'the Rat' officers insist a parolee take revenge on his informant by fucking him.

This brings us to the final narrative I wish to discuss by way of introduction: the straight-to-gay motif, so common in gay porn (the site *Str8 to Gay*[40] for instance, operated by the Men network[41]). In *Parole Him*, parolees are often identified as straight, either directly or through reference to 'girlfriends.' Sometimes the narratives suggest a rapid process from straight-to-gay, making it seem almost too easy a transition. For example, the summary for one video reads:

"For once in his life Soli did not resist! He knew that would mean going back to prison, where he couldn't fuck his girlfriend anymore so decided why the hell not."[42]

In situations such as this, the straight subject is presented as willing (even flippantly so) to partake in gay sex as a means to an end, in this case, as means to "fuck his girlfriend." In gay porn, convention dictates that the key driver motivating a straight subject to perform gay sex is money (or 'cash'), hence the profitability of actors' taking on the role of the 'gay-for-pay'[43] performer. Such 'for-pay' motivated narratives are illustrated in the web-based space by sites such as *Str8 Chaser* with its message that "every straight man has his price." Yet this idea is subverted in *Parole Him*, where it is the law enforcement officers who mandate gay sex be performed by the men in their custody, and where those who take part are often depicted as not-so-willing.

In one particularly memorable entry titled "the Rat," the officers facilitate a recently paroled prisoner enacting revenge on his own accomplice, who had testified against him. Yet the officers insist that this revenge take the form of anal penetration, of literally fucking the man who had 'fucked him' in a more metaphorical sense. At first the parolee resists and insists that he cannot perform the act:

- [VO][Parolee:] "I'm not fucking gay, how can I do this?"
- [Officer:] "I don't care if you're gay or not, you're gonna fuck him or you're going back to prison for five years."
- [Parolee:] "Dude I can't fucking do it I'm not gay. I don't have a hard fucking dick."[45]
- Yet he soon gets into the swing of things: [Parolee:] "I'll make you my little bitch now, for all that time I had to fucking serve. [...] I fucked bitches like you in prison, turn the fuck around. [While penetrating his accomplice] Sit and take it, yeah you fucking rat, now you know how it fucking feels. I got fucking four years, now you're getting fucked right now."[46]

I find forcing a straight subject to perform a gay act within a law enforcement setting reminiscent of the argument of the "everyday triumphs" of gay sex that "defy law's attempts to classify their conduct as deviant and restrict its expression."[47] In the words of Hocquenghem: "a thousand kinds of homosexual behavior challenge the classifications imposed upon them."[48] This idea is used

but inverted in *Parole Him*. Criminality is correlated with straight men, and homosexuality with the law. Yet it is not so simple, for such enforcement of gay sex is also clearly labeled as abuse – as itself criminal, and in fact, as the greater evil: it's the documentary evidence that would incarcerate the fantasy abusers. This point seems especially true in line with the parolees' 'minor crimes' – the textual descriptions of several scenes, for instance, all mention "minor possession" charges.[49]

Having introduced the key abuse narratives that underpin *Parole Him*, I wish now to broaden my scope and consider the place of the prison narrative in gay porn. Such a broader contextualization of *Parole Him* and the prison setting will provide the necessary categorical background for exploration of the fuckable felon and CCTV POV concepts later in the article.

[Go to page 2](#)

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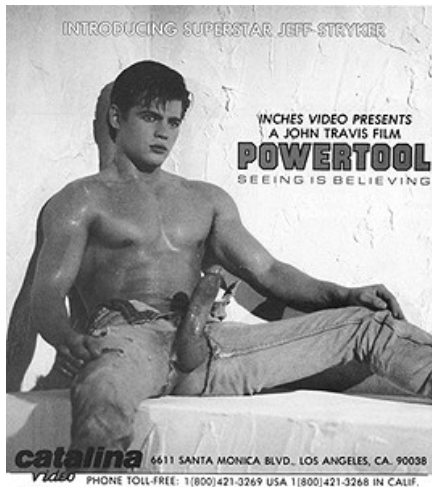
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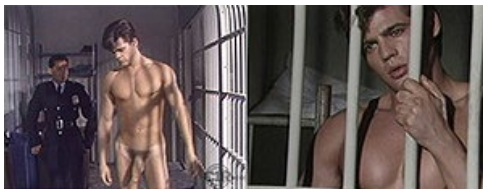
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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



*Powertool* documents the exploits of star Jeff Stryker while in prison ...



... and although the one incarcerated, Stryker's star power and 'power tool' puts him in a position of power over the gaze ...



... and the prison guards. ...



... The same cannot be said about the parolees of *Parole Him*. Their ordinariness ensures they remain caught up in the in-custody abuse

## *Parole Him* and the prison setting in gay porn

In his article on the myth of the prison in gay pornography, Mercer argues that this setting functions as “a highly eroticised all male environment, an arena where the active/passive dichotomy of gay pornography is staged and re-staged.”[50] [\[open endnotes in new page\]](#) Mercer’s reading of the prison scenario and its significance to U.S. commercial pornographic video was based on a textual analysis of 110 commercially available videos produced between 1987 and 2002, [51] from which he observed that such scenarios offer “idealised spaces” in which acts of “voyeurism, narcissistic display and active/passive role-play” take place. [52] These same attributes can also be ascribed to *Parole Him*, a site that is intelligible in line with the recent appearance of ‘abuse porn’ genres in web-based commercial pornography, such genres that have been a focus of my own recent research. I define[53] abuse porn as a variant of extreme pornography that caters to interest in rape, exploitation and institutional abuse. I used *Boys Halfway House*[54] as an exemplar of the genre, and its “probation is worse than he first thought it would be” abuse-in-halfway-house theming has much in common with *Parole Him*. In the case of *Parole Him*, its ‘abuse porn’ elements[55] together with its found footage ‘hook,’ take themes of voyeurism, narcissistic dominance and active/passive role-play to their homoerotic edge.

The incarceration setting is a recurring motif within gay pornography. Dyer,[56] for instance, opens his early piece on the genre with reference to the 1986 gay pornographic film *Powertool*,[57] which depicts the exploits of star Jeff Stryker while in prison. For Dyer personally, “excitement” in the film stems from seeing Stryker “on a set with cameras and crew around” and of the thought that the performers are “doing it in front of cameras, and you.”[58] Yet he does concede that this is not the reason that many find porn exciting. “For many,” Dyer writes, “it is the willing suspension of disbelief, the happy entering into the fantasy that *Powertool* is all happening in a prison cell.”[59] It is this kind of latter reading and the strategies of realism employed to help viewers suspend their disbelief that *Parole Him* relies on.

Yet Stryker was no ordinary performer. He was one of the first gay porn performers “to be aggressively marketed as a gay porn ‘star,’”[60] and is arguably responsible for the gay porn industry embracing the marketability of the gay-for-pay category.[61] Discussing *Powertool* in his article on the ‘gay-for-pay gaze’ in gay porn, Bozelka makes the point that Stryker – the man with the ‘powertool’ – occupies a dominant position despite playing the role of a prisoner. Bozelka uses the example of a scene when a policeman inspects Stryker for contraband, to which the star replies, “I bet you like looking at this asshole, don’t you?” In this respect, Stryker effectively lessens “the voyeur’s power of achieving pleasure in looking from an unobserved vantage point.” In this regard, such direct “You like (blank), don’t you?” constructions demonstrate the power of the ‘gay-for-pay gaze’ to disrupt the voyeuristic pleasure that might normally result from a new inmate’s cavity search. Stryker’s “star persona”[62] affords him a degree of control over the gaze. Such power is in stark contrast with the ‘straight’ parolees of *Parole Him*, who lack both star status and connection with a ‘gay-for-pay’ identity. To contrast the ‘cavity search’ from *Powertool* described above with a scene from *Parole Him*, the scene description reads:

“Officer Harrington regularly conducted cavity searches of the attractive young parolees that stepped into his office. These violations



fantasy.

would always be followed by hours of brutal penetration and anal ravaging.”[63]

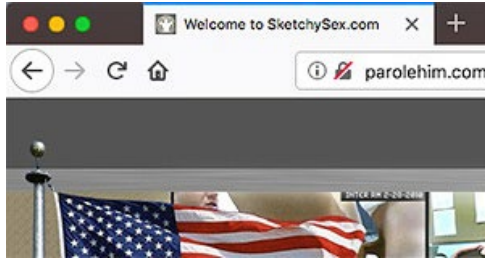
This example illustrates the inferior position of the incarcerated men in *Parole Him*, but also the ‘extreme’ nature of the fantasy – “hours of brutal penetration and anal ravaging.” These men, returning to Dyer, are not presented as performers “on a set with cameras and crew around,” but instead as ordinary men caught in an in-custody abuse fantasy. It is exactly the ordinariness of these men that contributes to the fuckable felon fantasy on offer.

Plenty of gay pornographic studios have catered to a prison fantasy in their features.[64] What makes *Parole Him*, and a handful of other sites, unique is its sole dedication to this particular motif as a standalone web-based offering, and its intersection with certain ‘aesthetics’ that render the site noteworthy in the web-based porn space. Yet equally I acknowledge *Parole Him* as linked with other sites that are thematically similar. These other sites have a shared context and thematic interest, namely the prison setting, and they will be considered at the end of the article *in situ* with *Parole Him* and the two key concepts I present now, namely fuckable felons and CCTV POV. We will explore the first of these concepts now.

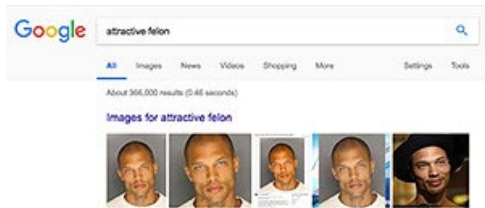
## Fuckable felons

The reason I selected *Parole Him* as my main case study was that I felt it warranted attention in line with gay male interest in a ‘fuckable felon’ fantasy. The fact that the site was so short-lived also attracted me, for these smaller, short-run sites rarely receive scholarly attention (in stark contrast with a long-running bait-and-switch site like *Bait Bus*).[65] The ‘fuckable felon’ character is an attractive, ostensibly straight male – convicted of a crime and incarcerated – that an audience would be interested in seeing get ‘fucked’ by a man or men in a prison or prison-related setting. Though this may sound like a particular fetish confined to the realm of gay pornographic fantasy, it in fact has wider appeal, both across gay culture more broadly and in mainstream (read: heteronormative) discourses. Such a fantasy also encompasses non-fictional felons. As illustration, let us consider the prison rape associations and fantasies that have been attached in recent years to two ostensibly straight men of note: Jeremy Meeks and Oscar Pistorius.

A Google image search using the search term “attractive felon” returns an image of Jeremy Meeks, a Californian man who in 2014 received international media attention when his mug shot, posted online by Stockton Police Department in California, went viral on social media. This viral event was picked up by a number of media outlets, including CBS. Reflecting on this viral event and reporting on CBS program *CBS This Morning* particularly, Rich and Ashby argue that the news anchors “behaved inappropriately, unprofessionally, and inhumanely in their reaction” to the story.[66] The authors take issue with ‘banter’ among the three anchors (Gayle King, Charlie Rose and Norah O’Donnell), including a comment by King that Meeks would be “very popular” in prison, followed by use of the term “bubba” by Rose.[67] Being “very popular” in prison is presumably a euphemism that Meeks would be at risk for sexual assault and rape from other male inmates, a reading supported by the term ‘bubba,’ which in the prison setting is slang for a dominant male who rapes other prisoners.[68] Such banter is perhaps suggestive of widespread indifference to prisoners’ well-being,[69] and associations between ‘pretty’ male prisoners and rape in the popular imaginary – often propagated by depictions of male prison rape in cinema and television.[70] This example also helps dispel what Turchik and Edwards describe as the “myths about male rape” in incarcerated settings,[71] providing for frank discussion of instances of male rape in prison, especially important given that incarcerated settings are believed to account for the greatest number of reported male rapes.[72] This final point bears on my argument about popular imaginaries and the way *Parole Him* belongs to the abuse porn genre.



An unsecured (non-HTTPS) members portal on *Parole Him*. The page is mis-titled “Welcome to SketchySex.com”. It is an unintended demonstration of *Parole Him*’s debt to the success of its sister properties, and also connotes a distinct sense of the abandoned, characteristic of transient, failed porn – such sites of which rarely garner scholarly coverage.



A Google image search using the search term “attractive felon” returns an image of Jeremy Meeks (September 2018 capture).



From inspiration porn to fuckable felon? We are invited to assess the body of Oscar Pistorius in these Tetsuharu Kubota images published in *Flaunt* magazine. He catches our gaze when in a huddled, vulnerable bodily stance (curiously with the photographer credit slicing through his folded body) ...



... and avoids our gaze when standing tall, allowing us to take in his penis bulge and 'blades' as non-threatening objects to be 'flaunted'. How do these phallic objects and his cyborg masculinity compensate for his lack of mobility?



Australian bushranger Ned Kelly is a romanticized outlaw, a hero even; while the criminals of *Parole Him* symbolize instead an objectified, pornified version of criminality.

Importantly, prison rape scenarios also function on the level of pleasurable homoerotic fantasy, as I discovered elsewhere[73] when reading comments posted to an online gay Internet forum in the wake of news that double-leg amputee Olympic and Paralympic sprint champion Oscar Pistorius had shot and killed his girlfriend on Valentine's Day, 2013. Following the news of Pistorius' crime, and the inevitable murder trial to follow, across the forum I observed and then wrote about "participation in a sadistic homoerotic fantasy that sees Pistorius stripped of his prostheses in prison and raped by inmates." [74] In my commentary I argue that "Pistorius is objectified and 'punished' for his crimes through discourses that rarefy his disabled body." [75] While those commenting also participate in a pleasurable, sadistic fantasy "of Pistorius as an object of homoerotic kink, as a 'cripple' [...] one might like to (hate)fuck." [76] Fascination with the attractive male felon in mainstream reporting, and gay fantasies of rape of these men in prison settings, make up *Parole Him's* broader context.

In terms of appearance, generally the parolees on *Parole Him* conform to the depiction of male rape victims in prison films, described by Eigenberg and Baro as "most often young, white men of medium build." [77] Yet this is not exclusively the case, and even those who do conform to this description are more than youthful and 'attractive felons,' these men function as 'fuckable felons.' The fuckability of these men extends beyond their youthful good looks and captures a more complex fetishization of criminality. Such criminality is not the romanticized, "idealized outlaw" [78] version – as is embodied by the cultural myths surrounding iconic nineteenth century Australian bushranger and outlaw Ned Kelly [79] – but instead an objectified, pornified version (see Mackinnon's discussion of the objectification of the 'other' in porn [80]). The median disclosed age of parolees on *Parole Him* is 23 and their crimes tend to be minor: assault (34%), possession (31%), home invasion (27%), driving under the influence (4%), possession with intent to distribute (4%).

Like with the Pistorius case, it is precisely the low-life criminality of these men – as girlfriend beaters for instance [81] – that renders them suited to the sexual violations depicted across the site, violations that connect with the narrative themes outlined earlier, which function on some level as a form of sentencing and also as a gay conversion, the latter being a common narrative device in gay porn. [82] We learn in the video description for one scene, [83] for example, that the parolee served "six months for assaulting his girlfriend," while in the video preview for the same scene the fantasy abuser treats the parolee's ostensible heterosexuality with contempt:

- [Officer:] "You had a dick in there? You had a dick in there before? Yeah you like dick."
- [Parolee:] "No."
- [Officer:] "No? I want to show you my dick."

As noted earlier, such depictions are distinctly class-based, these men being described in the text as

- "poor white trash," [84]
- "a street thug and a convicted felon [...] former gang banger," [85]
- "punk on parole," [86]
- "thugs [...] gangster," [87]
- "young construction worker [...] 29 year old 'fuck up.'" [88]

To point to one particularly insightful description: "These punks, gang members and crooks had no idea how to defend themselves against men like Officer Winters." [89]

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The felons in *Parole Him* are mostly young, white, and working class and there is something of the male rape about the manner in which the imposed sex is staged and emoted ...

... that resembles certain rape scenes in cinema, such as this one from *Blackmail Boy* (2003).

By contrast, parole officers are described in the text as

- taking “no pity,”[90]
- being “in no mood for resistance,”[91]
- having a “big Parole Officer cock”[92] and as
- being “one mean fucker [... with] zero tolerance for thugs like this.”[93]

Evident here is the distinct power differential between the “attractive young parolees”[94] and their elder abusers – common within the genre, also in *Boys Halfway House*, for instance. In *Parole Him*, the officer/parolee relationship is one of domination and submission, and in certain respects is characteristic of the daddy/son dynamic in gay porn, as presented in the following examples:

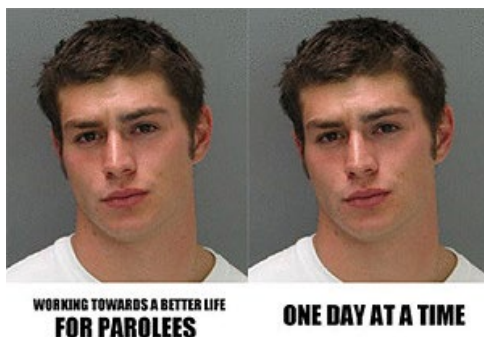
- [TEXT] “Officer Harrington likes the young ones. He would put them over his lap and spank their bare asses, then drop a load right in between their smooth young ass cheeks.”[95]
- [VO][Officer:] “Little boy ass. Yeah. Nice little boy ass.”
- [Parolee:] “No.”
- [Officer:] “Yeah ... I’ll keep you out of jail. I’m your fucking daddy now. [...] [Officer, while anally-penetrating the parolee:] You’re gonna be like this once a week, aren’t ya? You gonna be my boy? Huh?”
- [Parolee:] “Yes, sir.”
- [Officer:] “That’s what I wanna hear. Call me sir from now on.”[96]
- [VO][Officer:] “Who’s your fuckin’ daddy?”[97]

Mercer’s essay on the eroticized older male in gay porn helps make sense of the depictions of parole officer abuse on *Parole Him*, in particular in line with a ‘daddy’ persona.[98] Mercer notes the “mutable”[99] potentiality of the daddy persona within gay porn, and from the profiles he presents of these various personas, *Parole Him* most resembles “a domineering and potentially aggressive father figure in the enactment of abuse fantasies.”[100] Yet that ‘father figure’ role is taken further in *Parole Him*. Yes, acts of fatherly discipline are enacted (“He would put them over his lap and spank their bare asses”), and parolees are cast in the role of delinquent sons (“You gonna be my boy?,” “Little boy ass”). Yet we also see the prolonged abuse of power and exploitation characteristic of the abuse porn genre (“I’ll keep you out of jail,” “You’re gonna be like this once a week, aren’t ya?”). What can be described as an ‘abusive daddy narrative’ joins the other abuse narratives enacted across *Parole Him* that I outlined at the start of this article.

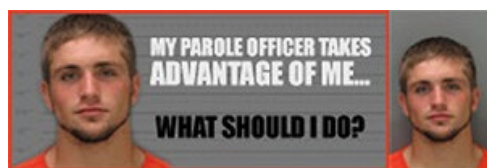
Returning now to the fuckable felon construction and the wider context of interest in such a fantasy, I want to turn attention to the banner advertisements employed by *Parole Him* in marketing the site and its in-custody niche.



*Parole Him* promotional banners were still visible on the site at time of writing, inclusive of these three compilations:







But these are coerced images drawn from actual booking photographs. This ...



... and this From Ada County Sheriff's Office, Idaho, ...

## Banner advertisements

A range of banners that promote *Parole Him* are still visible on the main page. I present a number of these here, also intending to preserve these texts – through *Jump Cut* and its visual essay tradition. Such banners usually show a series of mug shots with accompanying text, such as:

- “My parole officer takes advantage of me... What should I do?,”
- “Working towards a better life for parolees” and
- “Parolee Hotline 1.800.321.HELP.”

There is an implicit ironic contrast in these images and their accompanying text: the young men are presented as victims of parole officer abuse, yet also as objects for the arousal of visitors to the site, who presumably ‘get off’ on viewing such fantasy recordings. Importantly, the men depicted in the mug shots are not the models that then appear in the site’s videos. Instead, *Parole Him* uses actual booking photos of real men who fit the description of an attractive (fuckable) felon (see Boone, where many of these images appear). Such a tactic can be read in line with the homoerotic potential deriving from the attractive felon fantasy, but also as the site’s strategy of realism.

As part of an earlier discussion of what I term the ‘gonzo aesthetic’ expressed in sites by the same creator as *Parole Him* (*Fraternity X* and *Sketchy Sex*), I have advocated for a broader conception of ‘gonzo techniques’ within the gay porn category that go beyond the hand-held camera.[101] In particular, I demonstrate other gonzo aesthetics within videos, such as grainy footage or the use of particular props (i.e., beer bottles to connote drunken frat boys), as well as show how “this aesthetic can be strengthened by other objects and factors surrounding the texts,” including banner advertisements.[102] The banners employed across the *Parole Him* site, and presumably the Internet as well, illustrate my earlier point. Such imagery helps strengthen the site’s gonzo ambitions and its claim to house real surveillance footage. And this material is obviously controversial. That *Parole Him*’s creators decided to repurpose authentic images for the site’s marketing rather than to stage such imagery using informed consent from willing participants highlights ethical challenges, and constitutes a brazen move on their part. It certainly potentially undermines the site’s alleged compliance with U.S. Federal Labeling and Recording-Keeping Law.[103] These images of young men, taken while in the care of *actual* law enforcement, come to be *coerced* here through accompanying text – such as “My parole officer takes advantage of me” – and placement on a commercial gay pornographic website, where these men become unwitting actors in a subversive, pornographic fantasy.



... this from Broward Sheriff's Office, Florida, ...



... and this from Pinellas County Sheriff's Office, Florida, to attribute just a few.



*Parole Him's* repurposing of authentic images for the site's marketing potentially undermines statements of compliance with U.S. Federal Labeling and Recording-Keeping Law, and is further confused by the site's staged booking photos that accompany scenes.

I find the reproduction of these images across blogs and news stories elsewhere on the Internet equally problematic. In locating the source of these banner images, for instance, I was led to an article on *E! News*, where these men are objectified as “hotter than hot convict(s)” in a manner much more public than *Parole Him*.<sup>[104]</sup> In the article, all felons are numbered and their mug shots captioned. On number 13, for instance, the journalist writes: “This guy who is hot, but also looks dirty. You would like to bathe him.” Number 17, which depicts a teary-eyed young man, has the caption: “Dry your eyes, beautiful. Nobody cares when you take such a beautiful picture.”<sup>[105]</sup> Such narratives are just as dehumanizing as those on *Parole Him* in so far as they present these men as available as objects both because (captured by the police camera) and irrespective (“nobody cares”) of their crimes (which are not disclosed). These attractive felons are presented as available for us to claim and “to bathe,” their image is now ours to own, and we are justified in reading(/objectifying/pornifying<sup>[106]</sup>) these images as we like because these are criminals. Yet these men do not reach the level of “celebrified criminals”<sup>[107]</sup> in their own right, but are simply publicized as erotic objects, and serve as illustration of the ‘fuckable felons’ fantasy. At least in the case of *Parole Him* there is, arguably, a clearer presentation of such fantasies in line with a ‘victim narrative’ – “My parole officer takes advantage of me....” Such a narrative provides a good segue to other techniques employed by the site to strengthen its claim to realism. Such discussion is supported through the use of what I term ‘surveillance aesthetics.’

To understand the techniques that contribute to the surveillance aesthetics in the text, we need to return to the importance of setting in *Parole Him*. Prison spaces, together with army barracks, locker rooms and dormitories, serve as all-male environments in which the scenarios that take place are less restricted by the heterosexual world.<sup>[108]</sup> Part of the pleasure of *Parole Him* for its viewers is how easily well-known, all-male sites such as incarcerated settings can be sexualized via the pornographic recoding of acts of excessive force and abuse of power. What I am interested in here are the techniques employed by *Parole Him* to achieve this particular subversive fantasy, that mark its offering as authentic, and in some way real. In fact, surveillance aesthetics contribute to the extreme quality of the site's texts and its particular place within the ‘abuse porn’ category. A key technique is gonzo, defined beyond the hand-held camera,<sup>[109]</sup> which lends *Parole Him* a found-footage feel. Of particular interest here are the gonzo techniques unique to *Parole Him's* particular fantasy, namely the surveillance elements and the promotion of what I term ‘CCTV POV.’

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# JUMP CUT

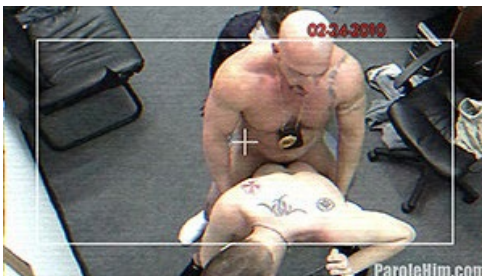
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Application of certain 'archival effects' to gay sex scenes in post-production, such as the addition of 'grain' and 'glitch' effects ...



... and CCTV timestamps to the footage help lend the scenes a feeling of 'archivalness'.



High in the corner camera angles are also utilized in *Parole Him*.



## Surveillance aesthetics and CCTV POV

In her book *The Archive Effect*, Baron argues that the archival document needs to be reformulated as “an *experience of reception*.”[110] [[open endnotes in new page](#)] What Baron terms “the archive effect” suggests that “the original form of the archival document is relevant only insofar as it produces a particular kind of ‘archivalness’” as it is “appropriated into a new work.”[111] Not only mug shots but other aspects of ‘archivalness’ shape the style of *Parole Him* and its dedication to what I describe as ‘surveillance aesthetics.’ Such aesthetics are inclusive of the artificial application of certain ‘archival effects’ to the recorded gay sex scenes in post-production as a means of authenticating the incidents. Such post-production techniques, such as the addition of ‘grain’ and ‘glitch’ effects to the footage, help lend the scenes a feeling of ‘archivalness’ and function as a form of anchorage[112] between the pornographic offering and certain signifieds, such as “authority, historicity, and meaning(fullness).”[113] The meaningfulness of such realist effects is explained by scholars such as Kilborn, who argues that increasingly viewers’ perception of audio-visual realism is determined by how closely a text “conforms to the style or mode of presentation he or she has come to accept as ‘realist.’”[114] In other words, the particular cues within the text that connote the real.

The popularity of reality television has been an important influence on such perceptions of reality in audio-visual representations (as has the ‘found footage’ genre in horror cinema). *Big Brother* (2000, CBS) has been especially important, employing surveillance-style footage as an “authenticity indicator.”[115] The bedroom camera set-up in *Big Brother* is of particular relevance to *Parole Him*. In the words of Crago,

“The bedroom cameras not only invoked the surveillance-style because of the grainy footage and limited visibility, but also through the high in the corner positioning of several cameras, which produced footage reminiscent of the convenience store security camera look.”[116]

High in-the-corner camera angles are also utilized in *Parole Him*, while the *Big Brother* example reminds me of Longstaff’s reading of *Big Brother*-contestant-turned-gay-porn-performer Steven Daigle.[117] In his reading of Daigle’s porn work, Longstaff argues that

“surveillance imagery associated with the visual rhetoric of both reality TV and pornography were reworked and repositioned as dual markers of both reality and fantasy.”[118]

Specific techniques employed in gay porn scenes as an homage to the performer’s reality television roots included grainy black and white footage and the red ‘record’ symbol (‘REC’) in the top left-hand corner of the screen,[119] both techniques of which are also utilized in *Parole Him* to encourage the viewer to read these scenes as reality. Technology indicators also extend beyond the visual, with sonic signifiers such as cell phone ringtones and dialup Internet further contributing to constructions of the real across the site. Such indicators combine with ‘props of parole’ – such as the electronic ankle tag[120] – and institutional bureaucracy – such as the desk ([TEXT] “He was later bent over the desk, and penetrated repeatedly”[121]). In one video preview the parolee even makes explicit reference to the presence of the ‘talking camera’ – “Why do you have cameras?”[122] –, a central genre characteristic of gonzo.[123]



Steven Daigle XXXposed was marketed as “a voyeur’s dream come true” and adopts similar archival techniques as homage to the performer’s reality television past.



Tziallas describes shots such as this from torture porn film *Hostel II* as enacting “a reverse POV shot from the camera’s perspective.”[49]



Gay porn sites such as *Men POV* offer a more intimate viewing position. ...



... But in abuse porn sites like *Boys Halfway House*, when from this viewing position we see young men performing vulnerability ...

In broader terms, from techniques to aesthetics, the influence of surveillance technology has also been discussed in the context of the ‘torture porn’ genre (horror films featuring extreme violence and torture). Surveillance technologies, such as cameras and computer monitors, Tziallas argues, symbolize “both the role and the effect technology has had in influencing our desires and expanding our ability to represent what was once unrepresentable.” In a similar way, to quote from one of the *Parole Him* descriptions as illustration: “Using hidden and overhead security cameras, Johnson was able to record the videos for his own personal viewing pleasure.”[124] And while the function of surveillance in films belonging to the torture porn genre is different from gay porn, there are similarities to note. After all, the term ‘torture porn’ encompasses films that depict environments “often imbued with sex, even if sexual violence is not actualised.”[125] As Rombes notes, the presence of surveillance technology in the horror genre embodies an “intense, narcissistic self-reflection”; the inclusion of screens within screens, viewers viewing viewers, exhibiting “a relentless survey of its own practices.”[126]

The use of surveillance technology in films belonging to the torture porn cycle – the *Saw* (Wan 2004) and *Hostel* (Roth 2005) franchises being key among these – enact what Tziallas describes as “a reverse POV shot from the camera’s perspective.” Such a perspective is central to *Parole Him*, and offers viewers what I term ‘CCTV POV.’

Of course, the POV (point of view) shot is well established within pornography, and within cinema.[127] POV has become synonymous with the rise of gonzo porn.[128] As Maina and Zecca write, “the ‘invention’ of the hand-held gonzo point of view (POV) shot [...] represents a turning point in pornographic representation grammar.”[129] And POV is also significant within the gay porn context, both as a themed offering within networks – e.g., *Men POV*,[130] part of the Gay Room Network – and in the aesthetic of emerging technologies, such as virtual reality. The POV shot is additionally significant within the context of abuse porn. As I note elsewhere concerning *Boys Halfway House*, the POV shot presents the action from the perspective of the fantasy abuser, and therefore, “encourages viewers to participate in the fantasies being staged.”[131]

Yet something distinctive occurs in *Parole Him*. In place of an actor – or awkwardly positioned cameraman – in the scene operating the camera, it is the viewer watching through the lens of the ‘archival effects’ surveillance camera who comes to embody the surveillance gaze. Watching the abuse take place through the grainy aesthetic of the recorded footage, those viewing *Parole Him* are granted a broad-view courtesy of the high camera angle, with all the necessary information to hand in the video descriptions to get a clear picture of the ‘victim’ and his backstory. This demonstrates, as I argue elsewhere,[132] that in gonzo, narrative often plays a central role.

... with pained expressions, ...	... torn underwear ...



... and puffy eyes; ...



... who are choked, ...



... bound, ...



... and generally degraded; ...



... and then sold to viewers as “fuck meat”, “fuck toys” and “cum rags”; ...



... in this case, sites like *Boys Halfway House* provide its viewers via the POV shot an insider perspective of a fantasy abuse scenario where the older abuser is both embodied by our gaze and thus ever-present – hence the site’s sinister slogan “he is not alone” ...



... and yet the abuser is also hidden and his identity protected ...



... a position that allows him to take and possess young boys in his care with impunity ...

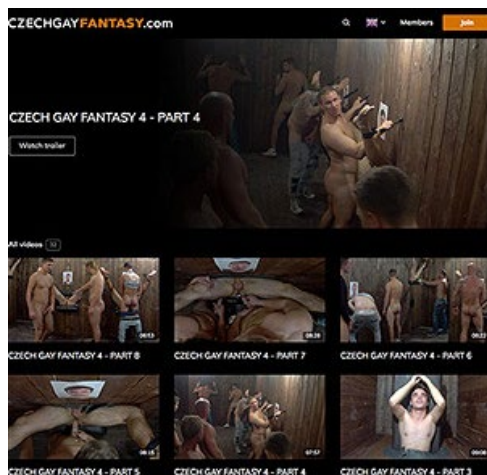


... while the value of the exposed boys of the halfway house is lessened, as is the potential for empathy through the POV, by the site’s marketing that by naming these boys as “convicts”, “felons”, “young deplorables” and general white trash ...

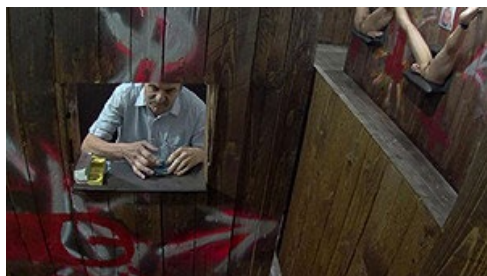


... designates them as entirely deserving of the abuse they receive (as is the case with *Parole Him’s* gay-sex-as-rehabilitation narrative).





*Czech Gay Fantasy* had five installments at time of writing, broken up on the website into smaller parts.



Men enter the “house of pleasure” via a ticket booth.



Inside the fuckable portions of men protrude from the walls, legs spread and ankles bound.

Before moving on to more in-depth textual readings of the *Parole Him* descriptions, it is worthwhile elaborating on my CCTV POV concept as it relates to gay porn, and its role in propagating abuse fantasies especially. Recently<sup>[133]</sup> I published on exploitation theming in three sites set in the Czech Republic – *Czech Hunter*,<sup>[134]</sup> *Debt Dandy*,<sup>[135]</sup> *Dirty Scout*.<sup>[136]</sup> In this recent work I connect these texts with nostalgic constructions of Eastern European men as ripe for homosexual exploit, drawing comparisons between this pornography and Eli Roth’s *Hostel* films especially. For the present article I wish to focus on another site from this same national context, *Czech Gay Fantasy*.<sup>[137]</sup> *Czech Gay Fantasy* has yet to be considered by scholars and aptly demonstrates my CCTV POV concept. Like *Czech Hunter*, *Debt Dandy* and *Dirty Scout*, *Czech Gay Fantasy* capitalizes on nostalgic constructions of Czech men as sexually open-minded and easily exploited by the promise of money, yet does so exclusively from a CCTV POV vantage point.

## CCTV POV case study: *Czech Gay Fantasy*

*Czech Gay Fantasy* belongs to the Czech Gay Authentic Videos (or ‘Czech GAV’) network. At time of writing Czech GAV comprised of six sites, four of which utilize CCTV POV, namely: *Czech Gay Fantasy*, *Czech Gay Massage*, *Czech Gay Toilets* and *Czech Gay Solarium*. Each site is billed as reality porn, the latter three – it is claimed – secured from the unsuspecting via hidden cameras located in a massage parlor, public toilets, and solarium, promising viewers totally legitimate, invasive, and intimate records of Czech men – inclusive of an in-the-bowl toilet cam for *Czech Gay Toilets*. Yet the site I wish to focus on here is *Czech Gay Fantasy*, for it also demonstrates the importance of narrative along with its entirely CCTV POV delivery.

*Czech Gay Fantasy* defines itself as a “never seen before [...] house of pleasure” and as “the only place to fulfill all your desires.” To date there have been five installments published (labeled CGF01–5 here) that last approximately one hour each, and are released via the site in smaller ‘parts’; the most recent installment is spread across eight parts. In the series, men enter a male sex warehouse via a ticket booth. Inside is an all-wooden attraction where, out of its worn walls are cut seven holes. Three of the holes are small and circular, these are glory holes: into these openings men insert their penises to be sucked. The remaining four are shoulder-width, out of which protrude men from the waist down. Three are at a pelvis elevation (two on their back, one on his stomach), while the fourth is closer to eye level. These men have their ankles bound and legs spread to reveal their assholes. The three at waist level are there to be fucked, while the ass at a higher elevation generally serves a desire for other forms of penetration, by tongues or fists or toys.

The sexual action is captured by CCTV cameras. Most are at a high angle, with locations that include: at the entrance overlooking the ticket booth; throughout the warehouse; and ‘behind the scenes,’ in the cubicles where the house’s sex workers are based. The same basic premise and pleasure-house-configuration is consistent across the series. The warehouse is empty and clean to begin with, but one by one men enter and that soon changes; the asses that jut from the walls are semen-covered shortly thereafter as the room fills up with clients, eager to take turns fucking (colloquially known as to ‘run a train’) on the available ‘flesh.’

The sex workers are presented as objects of pleasure; the first client to arrive in CGF03, for instance, begins by inspecting the merchandise on offer. “Nice head,” he says while stroking the face of a man waiting to suck a cock; the head does not respond, it simply awaits action, itself detached from the body, framed by the glory hole like a fairground attraction anticipating ball play.







The proprietor of the pleasure to be had is creepy looking and decidedly unattractive in contrast with the clients and sex workers who engage in sexual action.



CCTV cameras offer a behind the scenes view of workers in the pleasure house ...



... and the men that service through the walls are objects of pleasure. Notice how the heads of 'suckers' appear detached through the glory holes, awaiting use.

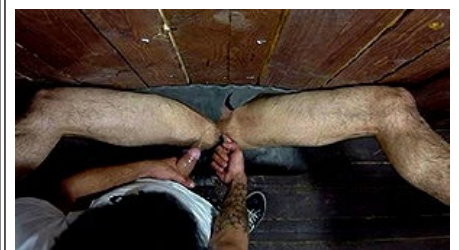
In addition to ejaculate, holes of the bound men are pissed and spat on. A shaken bottle of Champagne is even sprayed inside the ass of the man who had been fisted at an elevated level at the end of one installment (CGF03). The sex workers are not without a voice. Indeed, they often protest such treatment, but the clients are never stopped. The man in the ticket booth – middle-aged, unkempt, overweight – remains unaffected by any calls of protest, seemingly willing to allow visitors free reign in fulfilling all their desires, even as the action intensifies within the pleasure house. Assumedly it is into this ticket booth that the CCTV footage is streamed. This man has a look that is in stark contrast with the much younger, more attractive clients and sex workers that engage in sexual action. The man in the booth can often be seen in the foreground telling visitors to “have fun guys.” Even as the warehouse appears above capacity, this man remains unaffected, flicking through his ticket book in apparent anticipation of even more custom to the pleasure house. He seems to visualize the normally hidden true face of the gonzo pornographer: who is not in fact that attractive model who also participates in the sex, but often someone much less fantastical.



The spaces in which the men being fucked are housed resemble prison cells. The boy on his stomach in CGF05 is subject to especially rough penetration, the cell in which he is trapped is adorned with a spider and web.



Clients socialize over the exposed fleshy objects like they might at a public urinal. ...



... The exposed flesh serves as a receptacle into which the men deposit bodily fluids, piss included.

Some clients wear condoms, some do not. Some fuck harder than others, running up on an ass, surprising it with sharp thrusts, which are met with anguished cries from the torso within the cubicle. Overall the site is an example of “rough sex” and toys with limits; by the end of one session (CFG05), for example, the man being fucked on his stomach seems to teeter at the brink of his ability to endure such aggressive penetration, his screams of pain only fueling his penetrator’s strokes, even as the body of the fucked ass writhes in resistance. Piss is used to ‘clean’ and degrade, spit to lubricate and degrade. And a group mentality among the men visiting grows as more arrive. These men encourage rougher and more inventive uses for the available flesh, all in line with the site’s promise of an “all your desires” pleasure house. In one scene, men line up and piss on the exposed asses while chatting, as if at a urinal at a sporting match (CGF03). For the purpose of developing the CCTV POV device, I will focus on the latest installment (CGF05). And from this focus, will explore some of the representational challenges that result from this unique viewing position.



The men on their backs are so close their legs form a 'W'. Photos of the fuckable men were introduced in CGF04 ...



... and allow clients to see the face and torso that belongs to the ass or mouth they are using.

The fifth installment opens on a shot of the asses of the two men on their backs. Their cubicles are adjacent, and their ankles bound, the boxes in which they are confined of which I will refer to as 'cells' hereafter. 'Cells' is a better descriptor for these encasements, and also one that connects *Czech Gay Fantasy* with the in-custody genre that is the focus of this present article. These men *are* in-custody, and function as captive objects throughout the session: their movements, and therefore potential resistance, tempered by the wooden planks that entrap them. The confinement of these men is demonstrated by their own reference to their legs, which are bound, and the occasional call through the opening in their cells and out to the clients in the warehouse asking to be released. Also, the cell of the boy who is fucked on his stomach is adorned with graffiti of a spider and a web; the meaning is clear here: this boy and those being toyed with alongside him are caught.

The men on their backs are so close together their legs form a 'W.' Photos of the men (unsmiling) from the waist up were introduced in CGF04 and are now pinned above each hole that contains fuckable mouths and asses. Presumably this addition is to allow clients to see the face and torso that belongs to the ass or mouth they are using. This addition also adds a dehumanizing, cataloging element to the series not unlike the use of passport images for bidding scenes in *Hostel II*, such props that demonstrate an investment by the site in what Tziallas describes as "panoptic and synoptic watching and hyper-visibility." Yet while the addition of visual stimuli might function narratively to heighten the pleasure for the fictional 'clients,' it also extends the gaze of the viewer, who has more powerful documents at their disposal. We are privy also to the recordings from cameras located inside the cells, in which the 'real' (rather than photo-real), waist-up flesh of the men being fucked is housed, sometimes with their wrists also bound (in CGF04).

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# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



An in-cell sex worker looks at the camera, acknowledging that only the audience is granted a view of how he expresses the experience.

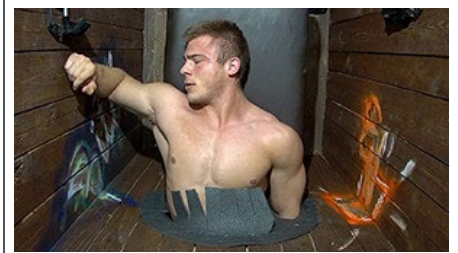
The extended, or panoptic, view of the audience is where CCTV POV differs from POV and gonzo. In CCTV POV the cameraman (and their hand-held device) is often removed from the action; and in the case of *Czech Gay Fantasy*, the one fucking is partially removed also – having access only to the lower, or designated-as-fuckable (i.e., mouths or asses), halves of the sex workers. Such removal of the ‘talking camera’ as well as the man who would normally carry it is what makes *Czech Gay Fantasy* an interesting demonstrative example: for in these texts it is only the audience, via the high corner angled CCTV cameras, who have access to the full picture, and therefore, the full story or point of view or *meaning* in the text.

It is in this regard that CCTV POV connects voyeurism with the surveillance gaze. In the words of Tzaillas:

“Such an ‘objectless’ gaze also follows from recording people 24 hours a day, as does the CCTV system [...]. Voyeurism is, more often than not, specific, while recorded surveillance can include copious amounts of ‘dead-time.’”



Analysis focuses on the experiences of two men. “1”, this is him, ...



... and “2”, this is him.



Penetration of both men starts promptly ...

Such dead-time is both present in the case of *Czech Gay Fantasy*, and also especially meaningful here, as my analysis will demonstrate. I confine my attention to the two men being fucked on their backs, side-by-side, as they illustrate best the role of CCTV POV in constructing narrative and bridging voyeurism with surveillance gazes. From this narrative I also draw out certain problematic aspects of this novel viewing position. As these men are nameless – a fact that further objectifies them – I will refer to them as “1” and “2” hereafter, 1 of whom is closest to the entrance to the pleasure house.

The men’s proximity allows them to speak to each other through the wooden planks that divide their cells.

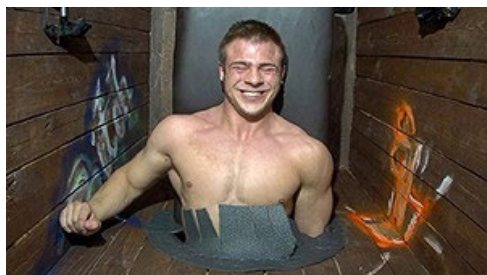
“It’s started,” 1 says when the first client arrives.

[2:] “I know.”

[1:] “Fuck.”

This latter installment in the series sees the addition of graffiti to the walls and a ‘smokier’ main area. These grittier additions serve as ‘reality markers’ for the viewer, and also contrast with the clear-air, serious clarity of the in-the-cell view of the sex workers; in the shots of 1 and 2, use of the top shot camera angle heightens feelings of confinement, claustrophobia and voyeurism. Penetration of both men starts promptly and comes with little regard for these sex objects’ preparedness to accommodate a penis:



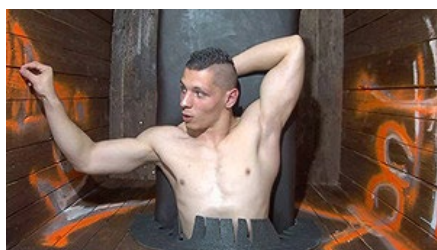


... and comes with little regard for these sex objects' preparedness to accommodate a penis.

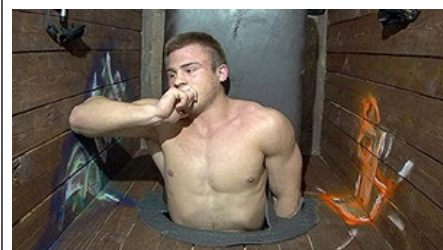
[1:] "Slowly please. I cannot do more."

[2:] "Fuck, slowly. Fucking slowly."

The cells are like coffins. In fact, only halves of coffins out of which useful (read: fuckable) parts protrude and bodies without genitals reside – the in-the-box camera angle creating an impression of being 'in their heads' (of being buried with them). Leather flaps form a seal separating the two halves, containing the sound in the cells and symbolizing a break in two vastly different POVs. Such separation allows the two men to hear each other more clearly and converse at a level that can be heard only by them (and the camera, of course). It also leaves them, at times, oblivious to what is unfolding outside the cell, thus allowing the clients to conspire all kinds of unique uses for their exposed parts – parts that, for the duration of this session at least, belong to the men in the pleasure house.



Proximity allows 1 and 2 to converse with each other between their cells at a level that can be heard only by them (and the viewer).



Out of a conversation during a rare moment of reprieve, 2 shows an especially human – non-pornographic – vulnerability. He is afraid.

Early in the session, after both 1 and 2 have already been fucked for a time, they find themselves in a rare moment of reprieve, from which a sub-narrative emerges:

[2:] "You have anybody?"

[1:] "No."

[2:] "Fuck, I'm worried about the school."

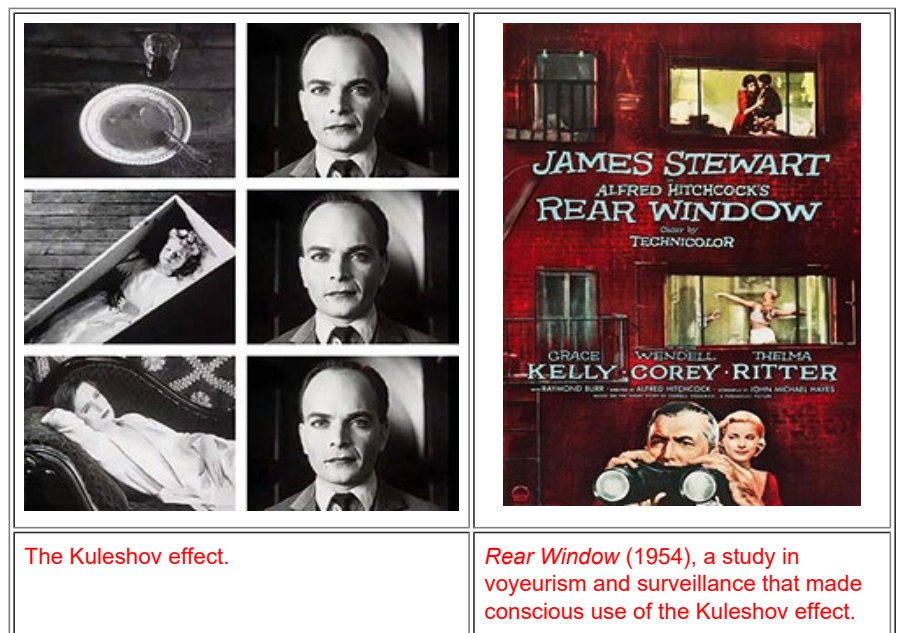
[1:] "Bro, everybody can fuck themselves."

[2:] "The teachers shouldn't see this, you know? I'd be fucked."

In the viewing position, scenes like these come as a surprise: as a sub-narrative separate, yet vastly more meaningful, than the main, "all your desires" narrative of the series as a whole. It is a disruptive narrative, one that elevates the text from its functional purpose – as a masturbatory (Czech gay) fantasy – and layers it with a human story. For viewers not so sadistically inclined, a feeling of empathy may form. "1" and "2," who are becoming increasingly hard to conceive of as nameless, offer up insight into lives beyond the confines of the *Czech Gay Fantasy* house. This surprising introduction of a sub-narrative also lends the installment a more cinematic feel, which is a departure from certain[139] received wisdoms of gonzo as antithetical to narrative.

Carrying forward the coffin metaphor. Being witness to the conversation between these men is like seeing a magician's 'sawing a woman in half' trick on one screen, while watching the assistant's blade-avoiding-contortions within the box via another. That is to say, there is overt voyeurism and an aspect of documentary





Hitchcock comments on the experiment in his conversation with Francois Truffaut, and using his murder film *Rear Window* (1954) as an example:

“let’s take a close-up of [James] Stewart looking out of the window at a little dog that’s being lowered in a basket. Back to Stewart, who has a kindly smile. But if in the place of the little dog you show a half-naked girl exercising in front of her open window, and you go back to the smiling Stewart again, this time he’s seen as a dirty old man!”[140]  
[\[open endnotes in new page\]](#)



Hitchcock’s example is itself interesting, as it is slightly different again from what Kuleshov describes. In the Kuleshov experiment audiences *read into* Mosjoukine’s expression different emotions based on the scenes his expression was intercut with. It is like applying semiotics to understand meaning in an advertisement: the scenes, though different, become connected in the viewer’s mind as part of a larger sign system, whereby an otherwise expressionless face is given meaning when positioned *in situ* with meaningful life events to which we



Hitchcock as subject to the Kuleshov effect.

can all relate – death, hunger, desire. But Hitchcock goes a step further, and considers how a face already full with expression (a smile connoting happiness) and therefore meaning, can then operate at a second level of signification, or what Barthes terms ‘myth.’[141] It varies according to whether his expression is either pure/appropriate/caused-by-little-dogs-in-baskets or deviant/pervy/a-dirty-grin-by-a-peeping-Tom-against-a-semi-naked-woman-in-her-home. (Of course, *Rear Window* is also a classic example of voyeurism and the surveillance gaze.[142]) But the narrative position of the film’s protagonist, Jeff (Stewart), also bears some resemblance to the situation of 1 and 2 in *Czech Gay Fantasy*; for, in the words of Hitchcock,

“You have an immobilized man looking out. The second part shows what he sees and the third part shows how he reacts. This is actually the purest expression of the cinematic idea.”[143]

These three aspects – image of immobilized men looking out, what they see, and how they react – are all present in *Czech Gay Fantasy*, but only via the CCTV POV. The men fucking 1 and 2, for instance, see only a limited version of these three aspects. They know the men are immobilized. At times they gauge reactions, when pleas to go “slowly” are loud enough, or via bodily cues from their exposed lower halves “tightening up.” But these clients, though partners in the sexual action, do not *see* as we do. They do not have access to the reactions captured by the cameras in the cells. They do not *hear* what these cameras pick up between 1 and 2. And therefore, they do not truly *know* what 1 and 2 see, nor have access to the second order of meaning that we do: where expressions of pain and discomfort gain significance beyond ‘rough sex,’ and become inscribed with an emotion as well. What the CCTV POV position shows us is that the man without a name, whom I have designated as 2 for practicality, is afraid.

The dialogue is also evocative of the bond between hustlers, while the vacant expressions of many of the men while being penetrated, together with the absence of sound in their bodily response, furthers associations of discomfort and attempts to mask it. Moments of ‘dead-time’ become especially poignant here, in particular as these moments invite speculation about the men’s inner world. Connection can be made here with the impacts of the male sex trade on those in it – the emotive ‘documentaries’ of Wiktor Grodecki are called to my mind, such as *Not Angels But Angels* and *Body Without Soul*, which examine the trappings of male prostitution and porn work in Eastern Europe (with a focus on underage boys). The soundless/soulless portrayals of those being penetrated invite reflection on the realities of porn and its production.



Reading of the action taking place in the pleasure house ...



... is affected by our view of the reactions of the men inside the cells, as an otherwise/(out of context) pleased expression ...

What are these performers’ backgrounds? How ‘real’ are these performances? While porn is, as Kipnis reminds us, “peopled by fictional characters,”[144] Kendall and Funk also point out that in casting these fictional characters, “gay male pornography uses real people, many vulnerable and easily exploited.”[145] What were the conditions surrounding the casting of these men? What were the personal circumstances that led them to undertake porn work? After all: the sex is real, not simulated. And the bodily experience of that sex is real too. Pointed to here are some of the representational and social implications together with some ethical dimensions of viewing brought forth by CCTV POV and its new spectatorial position.

The dialogue between the two men functions only as a brief interlude, and they are soon being penetrated again. “He’s so tight,” says the next man to enter ‘2’ following 2’s expression of fear – a tightness we perhaps read differently in context. The camera then cuts to a shot of 2 being fucked in discomfort. 2’s torso jolts with each thrust of penetration, his one available hand covers his face as he apparently holds back tears. His other hand also protrudes out into the warehouse, perhaps as another ‘handy’ item of flesh, it often functions as the only means to try and stop penetrators from being overly rough. This hand appears to also be a means for the worker to keep his hole lubricated and guide the penis into



... becomes coded with discomfort.

place as well, and is thus a ‘work hand.’

Generally 2 makes no sound while he is being fucked, save for short intakes of breath. Though when he does let out a “ah” sound it cuts through the relative silence of his cell. Seeing as we do the upper, or emotive, or human, half of 2, the only possible reading of his affect is one haunted by an extreme discomfort and desperate anxiety of exposure. 2 is fearful of what it could mean for him if this moment is ‘seen,’ a degree of self-reflectiveness common in the surveillance gaze, akin to characters in *Saw* pointing out the camera. The man fucking 2 seems to hear him. But this man is not privy as we are to the narrative that runs beneath the pleasure house, namely that it is not pleasurable for all. This man does not see as we do. And therefore, perhaps mistaking the sound for one of pleasure – or even enjoying the prospect of it as proof of discomfort – the man fucking him responds: “Yeah, ah,” and then moves on to other pleasures. 2’s hole does not remain vacant for long.



Fucking intensifies as the session nears conclusion and lines start to form to enter anuses ...



... cries of discomfort from the sex workers increases also ...



... but the men doing the fucking seem unable to hear the cries of pain ...



... but we can.

The camera switches constantly between the men fucking the asses in the warehouse, and the torsos of the men being fucked while in their wooden cells. Sonics play a key role in meaning here. The sharp contrast in levels between the warehouse and the individual cell: noisy moaning and skin-on-skin slapping that echoes through the warehouse can at times be juxtaposed with relative silence in the cell; that is until the intensity becomes too much and these small cells are filled with sounds of discomfort, such as toward the end of the sessions. When the atmosphere in the warehouse intensifies, and queues start forming to enter 1 and 2 and the men become more vocal – “Fuck him, call him beautiful whore” – 2 blurts out: “Fucking retards, I will fucking beat them up.” But even this is drowned out by the noise of those in the warehouse, who do not seem to hear him. But we do.

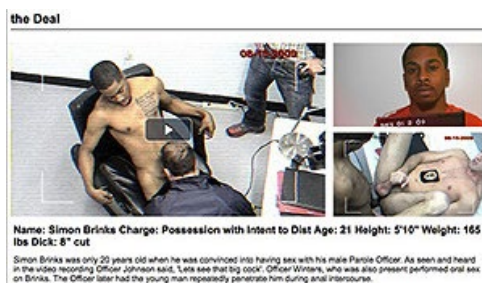
## Textual elements

Turning back to *Parole Him*. In addition to considering ‘surveillance aesthetics’


employed to authenticate the fantasy abuse of young men at the hands of their parole officers, the text accompanying the scene previews is also important to analyze. As I mentioned, this study is confined to all publicly viewable content on the site, which is inclusive of twenty-two entries. Each entry follows the same textual format: a title, an emboldened headline and a summary of the scene. The scene titled “the Setup,” for instance, has the following summary:

“According to Gibson on the afternoon of August 4th, Officer Johnson and Officer Harrington had sex with the young man during his weekly meeting. Gibson and the video recordings obtained during a search of the offices by police confirmed the victims account of the incident. The





Parole Him's scene structure, inclusive of video, images and text.



The 'About Recordings' page adds to *Parole Him's* realism claims.

37 minute long recording features two overly horny Parole Officers using their position to have a parolee do what they want. Also, the officers placed incriminating evidence on the parolee. This allowed the Officers to pressure the young man and have him give in to sexual intercourse.”[146]

As the above example demonstrates, the scene summaries adopt a legal, public record tone in describing the sex scenarios – “on the afternoon of,” “video recordings obtained during a search” – and position the footage as documentary evidence – “According to Gibson.” Clear connection is made between the sex and abuse – “incriminating evidence of the parolee [...] allowed the Officers to pressure the young man and have him give in to sexual intercourse.” Yet these summaries also offer hints to the site’s function as pornographic fantasy – “features two overly horny Parole Officers.” The summaries support the preview videos, which have a duration of approximately two minutes. The video for the same scene establishes the scenario that will allow for the sex to take place:

[Officer:] “Those bastards are gonna fuck your ass in jail.”  
 [Parolee:] “I don’t want to go back to jail.”  
 [Officer:] “So why don’t you tell us what it is you’re willing to do?”[147]

Pointed to here is a common narrative across the site that I referred to early in the article, namely: the threat of prison. In this example, the parolee is told that if he does not perform sexual acts the officers will use the “incriminating evidence” to have him sent back to prison, where he will also get raped. Such a scenario is in line with the site’s slogan of “either way, they’re fucked.”

Scene summaries are accompanied by a headline that includes the parolee’s name (surname, first), what he was charged with together with age, height and weight details; penis size and circumcision status is also listed. On first reading, these final penis size and circumcision profile ‘stats’ seem to betray the site’s gay porn intentions and undermine claims to the real. Yet on further reflection, perhaps this data is intended to be read instead as the inappropriate notes taken by parole officers in the course of intrusive physical examinations, such as when “bent over the desk and anal cavities [...] are] searched.”[148] This latter reading is more in line with the site’s “About Recordings” page, which gives the impression that *Parole Him* is dedicated to the presentation of the abuse materials without censor, so as to capture the “disturbing” reality of “officers [who] repeatedly abused their power.”[149] The abuse is reproduced on the site as “a matter of public record,”[150] hence the ‘archival’ quality of the recordings.



Sites like *College Boy Physicals* ...

I am reminded here of gay porn sites such as *College Boy Physicals*[151] and *Gay Medics*[152] that are dedicated to the fantasy of medical check-ups that turn into gay sex. While such sites tend to present all men as willing participants in the sexualization of otherwise routine (and bound by a medical code of ethics) penis and prostate examinations, I am inclined to also read such fetish narratives in line with the anxieties that many men feel in undergoing such invasive exams, and of the potential for abuse of power of the doctor-patient relation.[153] By extension, *Parole Him* seems keen on exploiting the potential for sexual abuse in prison settings at the hands of parole officers who violate codes of professional conduct. Part of these anxieties, and the categorizing of such narratives as fetish (or taboo) in the pornographic space, is explained by Lillie.

If we accept, as I do, that a key affordance of pornography in the Internet age is



... and *Gay Medics* are dedicated to the fantasy of medical check-ups that turn into gay sex. ...



... But what are the representational implications of such sites that make explicit the fantasy of a betrayal of codes of ethics and professional practice? ...



... And how might certain techniques, such as CCTV POV, play with the truth function of pornographic texts? The 'hidden cam' stylized videos hosted on *Sneaky Peek* [.net], for instance.

that it allows “almost every possible sexual representation, fetish, flesh tone, and body type” to be “quickly accessed and consumed,”[154] then resulting from such digital conditions is, to draw on Foucault,[155] the understanding that cyberporn is seemingly “engaged in telling us the truth about sexuality.”[156] The ‘truth of sex,’ as Lillie words it and as is revealed by cyberporn, is that as much as we might try to desexualize certain contexts, such as the medical examination,[157] and to label those who seek to impose the sexual onto such contexts as constituted by “sexualities of dysfunction (perverts, hysterical women, homosexuals),”[158] the reality is that ‘normal’ and ‘deviant’ expressions of sexuality and desire are not the natural categories historical discourse would have us believe.

The role of truth in pornography is a topic of ongoing debate. Williams, for instance, while acknowledging theories that with technological advancement will come “new and liberating truths about life,”[159] ultimately argues – and via an ‘extreme’ example – that the *truth* of the experience or suffering as captured on film “cannot possibly [be] determine[d ...] from the evidence of the film alone.”[160] I am in general agreement with Williams here – the unattainability of such truths underpins my personal distrust of media-effects views on pornography. (That is, that there is a direct and measurable impact on audiences from media texts and messages.) Yet I also believe that a nuanced understanding of the ‘truth’ in porn, gonzo or ‘realist’ porn especially, must come by way of an account for the role and truth-function of certain techniques and the texts’ technological conditions of production. In short, that in making a claim to the real, such texts utilize strategies – i.e., CCTV POV – that encourage viewers to read these texts in line with how more absolutely-realist documents might be read – CCTV crime footage, for instance. (Also, the *truth of the matter* that some viewers might be persuaded to accept certain gonzo texts as real, especially when such texts circulate decontextualized across the web – this is something I have observed and analyzed elsewhere.[161])

In line with Lillie’s critique, it is not my intention to argue that the particular fantasies on offer across *Parole Him* are inherently ‘bad.’ Such a view would be in line with harms-based readings of gay pornography[162] that interpret gay porn as inherently damaging to consumers and society at large. I prefer instead to view gay porn genres as part of a continuum (as proposed by Corneau and van der Meulen). Provided such depictions remain within the realm of fantasy,[163] I see no inherent harm in texts such as *Parole Him*, or other examples of ‘abuse porn.’ Yet such a position does not close off more critical avenues of analysis, as my reading of *Czech Gay Fantasy* in terms of the ethics bound up in what its unique spectatorial position reveals. That is to say, I am not uncritical in my assessment, especially as we as scholars monitor the increasingly extreme development of the abuse porn genre.

In this vein, I see examples such as *Parole Him* as residing at the extreme end of a porn continuum, edging the spectrum further apart from the “soft,” “mellow” and “glossy” sites at the opposite end of gay porn offerings.[164] Consideration of these abuse porn sites according to a continuum allows us to observe the emergence of more extreme narratives, performances and techniques that have been facilitated by cyberporn. As a final consideration, I will broaden now to briefly consider other sites that exhibit the same (or closely similar) themes to *Parole Him*. Such an exercise invites consideration of the applicability of the fuckable felons and CCTV POV concepts, providing tangible illustration of some future research directions.

**Towards a typology of in-custody gay abuse porn.  
Fuckable felons and CCTV POV strategies on  
*Young Perps*, *Gay Patrol* and *Strip Search Hell***

I wish to end the present article with a consideration of three other sites also from the in-custody gay abuse porn genre, namely: *Young Perps*, *Gay Patrol* and *Strip Search Hell*. These sites all arrived on the scene after *Parole Him* and invite comparison with *Parole Him* and the various textual elements and strategies that have been discussed in this essay. I read these more recent texts *in situ* with *Parole Him* in order to demonstrate how my fuckable felons and CCTV POV concepts can be applied to other examples, and therefore adopted by scholars going forward. I begin with *Young Perps*.

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

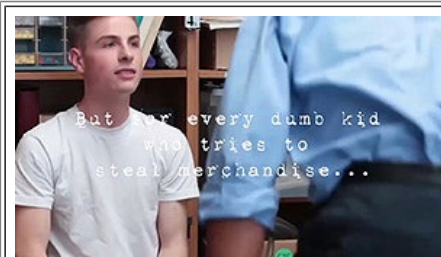
## Young Perps



*Young Perps*, with its young-straight-perps-disciplined-with-gay-sex-by-law-enforcement theme, reads like a youth-oriented reimagining of *Parole Him*.

*Young Perps*[165] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] is both the most recent iteration (launched in 2017) of the in-custody gay abuse porn theme, and the most similar to *Parole Him*. In fact, the site can be productively understood as a youth-oriented re-imagining of *Parole Him*. If *Parole Him* failed, as its creator believes, due in part it is niche and in part to its execution,[166] then *Young Perps* tests the viability of *Parole Him*'s premise through reinvention of its formula in a more juvenile space – and with a softer, more 'pornish'[167] set-up. *Young Perps* is similar in its presentation and its content. Scenes are presented across the site as "case nos." and adopt a comparable public record tone, e.g.,

"August 20, 2018. 5:59 P.M. Petty theft; vandalism. One suspect, 28 year old male, 5'7", was detained after spray painting over security cameras. After further investigation, it was revealed that numerous items from multiple stores had gone missing while the security cameras were out of operation."[168]



The 'perps' are young, petty offenders.



These are fuckable delinquents, and some look very young.



"Just please don't tell my parents!" was an early site slogan.

In place of parole officers, in *Young Perps* we have loss prevention officers; in place of paroled felons we have young petty theft offenders, or in the words of the site's marketing, "every dumb kid who tries to steal merchandise." The 'threat-of-prison' narrative I discussed with regard to *Parole Him* is carried over here. Except in place of more prison time as leverage for sexual submission, we have threats to refer the juveniles to police or inform their parents about their petty crimes. In short, here we have 'fuckable delinquents.'

In this youth-oriented variant, scenes often begin with the delinquent displaying disrespect for authority. Such displays are inclusive of expressions characteristic of the rebellious teenager – sarcasm, talk-back, eye-rolls. The officers in this instance 'teach' the boys respect for authority: "this will teach you," one officer tells a delinquent as he sucks his cock.[169] This is of course a variation on the 'gay-sex-as-rehabilitation' theme from *Parole Him*. "Just please don't tell my parents!" of which was an early slogan for the site. In one scene,[170] when the delinquent's phone rings just as the officer is entering his anus, the officer picks it up: "Isn't this perfect timing, look at this, it's your father. Here answer it." He then makes the boy speak with his father while he is being fucked.

Scenes[171] frequently begin with the officer switching on various cameras around the office, which functions as a wink to the audience that they, through this view, are the eyes and ears for the action to follow. These multi-angled vantage points (including on the ceiling with a direct shot downwards) service the CCTV POV view, and are inclusive of footage of the delinquents as they wait with unease

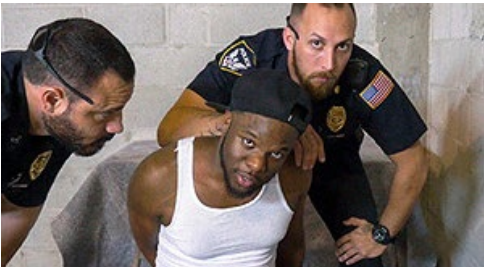


A young offender looks down the barrel of the hidden camera while getting fucked.

while the officers are out of the room. Officers also make use of their own mobile phones to capture additional, spontaneous shots. When footage from these additional sources is shown a grain effect is applied, distinguishing the footage as additional to the high-quality feed that is drawn from various locations around the security office. Occasionally the hidden cameras are also pointed out to the captive men,[172] such a device allows those in-custody – whose first act when alone is usually to try and escape from the locked room – to communicate directly with the audience, to ask what they are doing there and why they are being watched, for instance.

	
The big black cock (BBC) serves as a key weapon of intimidation ...	... rehabilitation ...
	
... and degradation. ...	... While the white daddy also serves an eroticized father/son disciplinarian function.

A key variation in *Young Perps* is its increased representation of Black performers, especially as officers. While this is a welcome change, such an addition should be read in line with the youth-oriented angle of this porn, and the spectacle of oversized Black cocks in, to quote another site, “tiny [primarily] white asses.”[173] In short, these men cannot be easily divorced from Black gay porn stereotypes. In this regard, deep-throat scenes are especially popular across the site and its marketing, with difficulty in accommodating the cock plain on the delinquents’ faces, and frequently serving as itself a form of punishment and rehabilitation.[174] The familiar big black cock (BBC) top/white twink bottom dynamic serves in this case to make the penetration spectacle that much more extreme. And while there is also some variation in the portrayal of offenders – including Asian and Latino performers – the site primarily presents young, usually white males, paired up against big-dicked Black ‘thugs’ and more mature, hirsute, daddy-type white officers.



Gay Patrol is devoted to a racialized thugs-that-penetrate in-abuse fantasy.

Gay Patrol

Gay Patrol,[175] like *Parole Him*, had a limited run. It released 19 scenes between November 2016 and August 2017 and is best described as a multi-racial in-custody abuse site, this time with police rather than parole officers. As an excerpt from its description reads:

“This is your source for the Real Dirty Gay Cops. See these power hungry and horny cops take control of our black population and fuck them. No shit, these hot cops from Gay Patrol display their power by





Dirty white cops 'punish' Black thugs "with their assholes".

taking the law into there [sic] own hands, and punish these big black cocks with their assholes."

As is suggested by the above description, *Gay Patrol* is dedicated to a racialized in-custody abuse fantasy, similar to what I observed in *Parole Him* regarding Black felons. Namely, Blacks as thugs that penetrate, yet are still subject to police brutality and exploitation. The "dirty cops" are white, and prey on "big black cocks" they can "punish [...] with their assholes." Notice how the Black population is reduced to big black cocks (or BBC), an objectification process whereby Black representation in gay porn is contingent on an abnormally oversized cock (hence lowercase "b" for black in BBC and this site).



The sex is often staged in public locations and urban street settings such as back alleys ...



... and public stairwells.

*Gay Patrol* carries over the sex-as-rehabilitation narrative from *Parole Him*. The description for "The Bait Car," for instance, notes in the case of a Black car thief:

"He kept running his mouth and lying to us about the car being his. So we decided to teach this guy a lesson. [...] It was only a matter of time before he had his big black cock deep down our ass."



Felons are presented in line with a "black thugs archetype" and the series tied to distinctly U.S. racial tensions and reports of police brutality. Notice the camera-viewing-camera construction of this image, which seems to suggest the viewer has a role as documenter of the abuse taking place.

Yet *Gay Patrol* is most interesting for its construction of Black men in line with a "black thugs archetype" and reduction of these men to associations with street crime and as bearers of extreme phallic objects of lust – the latter of which some believe stretches back to the colonization of Africa by the Romans.[176] Penetration in this context means something different, functioning as a form of objectification and humiliation in much the same way as a white male getting fucked does: [TEXT] "My partners and I decided to teach him a lesson. We made him fuck the shit out of us."

The officers have the thugs fuck them in urban, street settings such as back alleys. [177] The series is of course also tied to distinctly American racial tensions, and highly topical issues of police brutality, which lends it a more sinister dimension. The scene descriptions are heavily racialized. I will draw on one scene to illustrate. The scene is titled, "Fucking the white police with some chocolate dick," and in it Officer West knows when he gets a call about "Dumb, criminal activity, in the middle of the day" that "some black son of a bitch was doing it. Sure enough, we pull up and a delicious piece of chocolate is behind the wheel driving recklessly." The felon is then described as "salty chocolate," "gangsta," "black snowflake" and "our little darkie friend," all in the space of a single scene description. And this "gangsta" is said to "take the easy way out by letting some white chocolate have a little fun with them," fun which takes the form of "that big black dick [...] deep in cracka cop." And while there is hope this "darkie" will have "learned his lesson" from the encounter, Officer West is inclined to believe the felon will reoffend, as he "does whatever he wants." More detailed account for the signifying role of race in this context would be a worthwhile future scholarly project. I conclude here by considering *Strip Search Hell* as illustration of the CCTV POV position, along with some other mentions.



*Strip Search Hell*



Sites like *Breeder Fuckers* mix the performance of British working classness with crude acts of (staged) abduction, sexual assault and sadism.



*Fraternity X* cultivates “gonzo aesthetics” through the use of certain props and narrative devices – i.e., used alcohol containers, cigarette butts and performers more interested in watching a fight on TV, makeshift performer/camera operators – that heighten realism on the site.



*Strip Search Hell* takes brutal prison strip- and cavity-searches as its central abuse narrative ...



... together with acts, such as hosing down of inmates, that are evoked by the term ‘prison abuse’.

*Strip Search Hell*[178] is dedicated to, as its site slogan reads: “Hard Convicts Made to Suffer.” It comes from the same team that produce such sites as *The Casting Room*,[179] *Brutal Tops*[180] and *Breeder Fuckers*[181] (formerly trading as *Straight Hell* – not to be confused with the Eastern category site stylized as *Str8 Hell*, which will receive a mention soon). In his recent, near-encyclopedic survey of gay porn, Mercer included a brief discussion of *The Casting Room* and *Breeder Fuckers* as examples of what he terms “the ‘fooled’ straight man” device.[182] In setting out this device, Mercer notes that “the straight man is fooled, compromised and derided,” and that the team behind these particular sites he nominates have had a reputation for a certain “verité aesthetic,”[183] *Breeder Fuckers* especially (together with another sister property, *Brutal Tops*), which mixes the performance of British working classness with crude acts of (staged) abduction, sexual assault and sadism – inclusive of forced fecal consumption, for instance. Mercer also bundles college-hazing site *Fraternity X* as part of the same discussion, *Fraternity X* of which I have discussed at length elsewhere as constructing a sense of documentary realism via its enactment of “gonzo aesthetics.”[184] *Strip Search Hell*, therefore, joins a thematic repertoire that has already been defined, while also bringing with it the in-custody abuse angle (new terrain) that is the focus of the present article.

Of the three sites chosen for discussion in this section, *Strip Search Hell* is most closely aligned with *Parole Him*’s use of archival effects – such as grainy footage – that strengthen its documentary realism aesthetic. The site’s description is the first content available to visitors once on the site, and it encapsulates both *Strip Search Hell*’s theme and its connection to *Parole Him*:

“Hardened criminals are totally humiliated by the ritual of strip searches. It is heartless cruel punishment and richly deserved as these men have no choice but submit to invasive and degrading naked inspections. Ill treatment at the hands of thoughtless sadistic guards and all captured on video for your entertainment.

You need have no sympathy as you watch video after video of unrelenting humiliation. These men knew that their punishment would be harsh but probably didn’t realise total nudity would be mandatory. They gave up their rights the moment they broke the law, don’t you think?!”

As with *Parole Him*, fuckable felons are presented as “richly” deserving of the “unrelenting humiliation” they receive, and such sexual abuse is defined as a form of sentencing: “These men knew that their punishment would be harsh but probably didn’t realise total nudity would be mandatory.” The site confines itself to sexualizing procedures of male incarceration, inclusive of strip and anal cavity searches, and hosing down of naked prisoners, all with the brutal force characteristic of this site and others produced as part of the same network. Notice how reference is made in the above to the site’s reverse mode of address, whereby the audience is included as part of the fantasy via the CCTV POV:

“You need have no sympathy as you watch video after video of unrelenting humiliation. [...] They gave up their rights the moment they broke the law, don’t you think?!”

The moralizing “you need no sympathy” position conforms with the dehumanizing, fuckable felons narrative, while also eroticizing the kinds of abuse practices depicted in prison television programs and films, as well as testimonies of similar abuses to have occurred in such settings.[185]

Since the turn of the millennium, imagery of prison abuse has tended to be bound up with our ever-pervasive surveillance culture. Images of male Iraqi prisoners sexually abused at the hands of U.S. soldiers in Abu Ghraib Prison are called to



This image captures the humiliation and sexualized torture that occurred at Abu Ghraib Prison.



In *Strip Search Hell*, by concealing the faces of the perpetrators ...

my mind. Yet *Strip Search Hell* departs from this more familiar imagery of prisoner abuse through a process of reverse protectionism. In the images from Abu Ghraib, as Gutterman writes, “For the most part the prisoners’ faces are hidden from us.”[186] Hidden faces also mean concealed identities for the prisoners, their faces both blacked out and in part protected; and through the release of these images, the offending officers’ faces are conversely made viewable to the public, and therefore open to shaming (and prosecution). In *Strip Search Hell* the reverse is true. The faces of the officers are concealed, and thus protected, while the prisoners are captured fully by CCTV and handheld cam. And therefore, enacted across the site is a kind of perverse heterotopia, to draw on Foucault: a queer, other space that subverts our viewing expectations. Perhaps this is what makes such sites exciting; the manner in which they are visually coded, or thematically composed, of which lends the content a tinge of the forbidden. Whereby viewers might at first question whether what they are viewing is *real* or not. (Elsewhere I explore this exact potentiality with regard to decontextualized *Fraternity X* videos that circulate across tube sites.[187])

By concealing the faces of the perpetrators, the face of the prisoner becomes more poignant, more vitally present. This site also invites those viewing to assume the abuse position – “don’t you think?!” – and to superimpose themselves onto the faceless officers. In this respect, the “thoughtless sadistic guards” become simple placeholders for the audience, who is encouraged to assume the guards’ POV, and participate through viewing – “need have no sympathy” – in the degrading treatment of deserving, exposed, and always fuckable, felons.



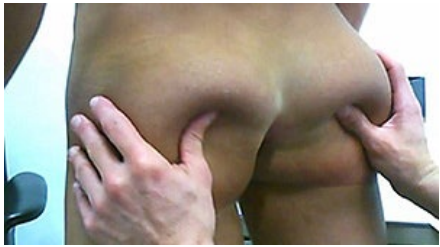

... the visible face of the prisoner becomes more poignant, more vitally present.



Such imagery perverts the already homoerotic conditions of all-male prisons, as illustrated by Luke Smalley’s *Laundry*.

Finally, and again in the spirit of encouraging subsequent porn studies’ uptake of the ideas presented here, I offer some other site descriptions as honourable mentions.




<i>Guys in Lockup</i> is big on prison procedure ...	... at times to the point of the mundane.
	
Cavity searches take place in <i>Parole Him</i> too ...	... though have the decidedly more pornish goal of planting semen instead of finding evidence, and the forced performance of such searches renders the site more resolutely pornographic (that is, in line with a fantasy scenario).



*Iron Lockup* bills itself as “documentary porn” ...

- ***Guys in Lockup***.<sup>[188]</sup> This site is similarly devoted to cavity searches. It too adopts reference numbers as titling, and distinguishes itself as a site where there is a “Big focus on procedure,” including finger printing and preparation for transport checklist procedures. Such a focus makes it especially voyeuristic, and niche. At times even mundane. It is clearly marketed to an audience with an appreciation for that particular reality (think airplane enthusiasts who reenact in-flight safety demonstrations as a leisure activity). Models have a distinctly average appearance (inclusive of body shape), and the arresting officer frequently points out the camera, naturalizing its function in the fantasy. Yet even in the mundane, as we watch fantasy offenders undergo seemingly routine cavity searches, the inherit humiliation and dehumanization of these acts seeps through – hence the eroticism of this particular fetish. To quote from the site’s own marketing: “An Offender’s dignity is stripped along with his clothes during the strip search and visual cavity search procedures where they’ll be required to lift their penis / nuts.”<sup>[189]</sup>
- ***Iron Lockup***.<sup>[190]</sup> This site is similarly geared toward strategies of realism, billing itself as “documentary porn.” Again we find greater variation in body type, with a more extreme commentary on the effects of long-term confinement. But the site is also more clearly constructed as a kink project, with some scenes more dungeon than cell-like in how they are dressed. Reference to “sir,” “puppy” and “pig” abound. The site explores various





... and utilizes CCTV POV and surveillance effects in service of this.

aspects of homoerotic prison life inclusive of masturbation in solitary confinement and exposed urination. CCTV POV is utilized as are surveillance effects inclusive of grain and high-corner room angles.

- **Jail Lust**.<sup>[191]</sup> This is a site that explores the eroticization of jail life in a more conventional porn sense. It is more costume porn than prison porn by comparison with other sites discussed here, yet is a notable departure from most U.S.-centric porn, with a particular emphasis on Asian performers.
- **Str8 Hell**.<sup>[192]</sup> Within the Eastern category, this site is devoted to str8-to-gay fantasies and includes specific in-custody narrative categories – namely the *Airport Security*<sup>[193]</sup> and *Young Offenders*<sup>[194]</sup> series. The *Young Offenders* series shares much in common with *Young Perps*, such as storeroom-set manhandling. Again, this site is distinct from the U.S.-centric texts discussed here, which tend to subscribe more to the four themes set out at the start of the article. In place of these themes, at *Str8 Hell* there is a greater sense of anything-can-happen, corrupt brutality to the texts, as is common to texts set in Eastern Europe – as per my reading of *Czech Gay Fantasy*.



Str8 Hell's *Young Offenders* series includes storeroom-set law enforcement manhandling ...



... and shares much in common with *Young Perps*.



Str8 Hell's *Airport Security* series is also relevant ...



... while the Eastern European context lends the site a greater sense of anything-can-happen, corrupt brutality, as can be seen in other sites of the genre, such as *Debt Dandy*.



*Bait Bus* was one of the original bait-and-switch sites ...

## Conclusion

*Bait Bus* is another web-based gonzo reality gay porn site, and an early example (emerging in 2002). The site employs a bait-and-switch device, with its premise, described by Cunningham, involving “straight men being lured into a vehicle by the (false) promise of sex with a busty female porn vixen.”<sup>[195]</sup> After being lured into a ‘bus’ by the female bait, “a young gay ‘bitch’ is revealed as the pleasure provider” and the ‘straight’ man is then “all too willing to perform gay sex now



... but this device is taken further in abuse porn sites like *Parole Him*, which adopt gonzo techniques to heighten the sense of the real and the intensity of the fantasy abuse depicted.



*Parole Him* is joined in the genre by other sites such as abused-while-on-probation site *Boys Halfway House*.



The objectification of Black performers in sites like *It's Gonna Hurt* ...

that he's already taken the bait.”[196] Described here is a familiar formula within texts catering to a ‘str8-to-gay’ narrative fantasy. Yet, despite its prominent position in the site’s title, Cunningham argues that “the ‘bait’ is stripped of its connotations of hooked entrapment and replaced with a ‘tease’ for virtual gay audiences.”[197] In other words, that the absence of the potential for violence and risk limits the power of the ‘bait’ device in *Bait Bus*. This is a fundamental point of differentiation between sites like *Bait Bus* and those – like *Parole Him* – belonging to the abuse porn genre. In such sites, narrative hook devices – such as bait-and-switch – are taken much further, and hence such texts often become labeled as examples of ‘extreme porn.’

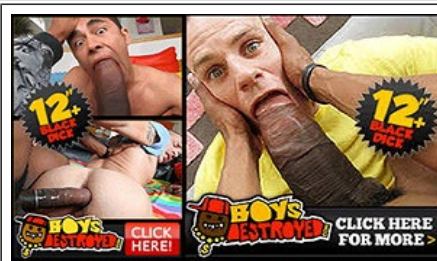
In addition to a more fully-fledged execution of any controversial – i.e., non-consensual or exploitative – narrative fantasy, a defining feature of the abuse porn genre has been the adoption of gonzo techniques that help heighten the sense of the real, and with it the risk factor/classification challenges of certain depictions. In short, techniques borrowed from documentary cinema allow sites with extreme theming to blur normally well-defined distinguishing traits of factual and fantasy texts. Web-based abuse porn texts, therefore, go further in extreme narrative theme and in their realism claims. Texts within this genre encourage viewers to believe that what they are seeing is in some way real, moving the abuse fantasy narrative to the homoerotic edge. And resultant of this, the ‘bait’ device is made more sinister in sites belonging to the abuse porn genre when compared with earlier ‘bait concept’ sites such as *Bait Bus*.

In place of a ‘tricked into gay sex’ narrative (*Bait Bus*), for example, we now have young men in a halfway house with the ultimatum of gay sex or homelessness (*Boys Halfway House*);[198] college students drugged and raped by drunken frat boys in humiliating hazing rituals (*Fraternity X*);[199] and debt-stricken young men in Prague who perform gay sex in exchange for the payment of debts (*Debt Dandy*);[200] all sites that also utilize realist techniques (such as glitch effects that mimic found footage and the hand-held camera) in an attempt to mask the fantastical nature of the pornography, such authenticating techniques of which I have explored elsewhere with respect to each of the foregoing named sites, and each time in service of furthering understandings of the emergence in recent years of the abuse porn genre.

*Parole Him* belongs as part of this list, and brings new insight into this variant of extreme pornography. Its abuse narrative – young straight felons given the option of submitting to gay sex or being sent back to prison – is combined with key realist techniques, namely through the mobilization of surveillance aesthetics and what I term here, CCTV POV. The site also taps into an issue of significance beyond the film and porn studies fields, as demonstrated by my discussion of a fuckable felons fantasy. It is a fantasy that caters to gay interest in the objectification and ‘pornification’ of attractive male criminals and carries with it certain representational problems, such as a correlation between gay sex and criminality.

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... and Boys Destroyed needs more research ...



... in particular in the context of the in-custody abuse porn genre.

As was revealed through my close readings, these men are routinely presented as disposable and deserving of abuse. The felons of this pornography of whom are ascribed an object-fuckability quality (comparable to the process MacKinnon terms “thingification”[201]). On this characteristic, I consider the case of Black men, whose oversized penises become themselves exotic objects of lust and excess. While in certain in-custody abuse texts – *Parole Him* and *Gay Patrol* especially – these men get the opportunity to penetrate, blackmail tactics are still used against them to remove any consent or agency. The racial dynamics that are staged at the intersection of pornography and crime is an area touched on here and that helps demonstrate a key area of problematic representation, though was also an avenue that was partly outside the scope of the article and would thus be a worthwhile future project.

The article’s inclusion of a range of other texts belonging or related to the in-custody abuse porn genre – read to varying degrees of depth and always *in situ* with *Parole Him* – was both in line with the importance of context to any qualitative textual reading, and also intended to encourage uptake of my fuckable felons and CCTV POV concepts by other scholars. These supplementary readings serve both as a means of demonstrating the applicability of my concepts across the in-custody abuse porn variant, while also being intended to stimulate among those reading ideas about the concepts’ even broader applications.

Future application of these concepts could take scholarship beyond prison and in-custody themes to settings that are different, though still related in certain respects; towards public-sex sites (i.e., *Out in Public*[202]) or general bait and public-prank geared offerings (i.e., *Rub Him*[203]and *Gay Violations*[204]), for instance, which often also utilize surveillance aesthetics and make certain reality claims themselves. Together with sites that include narratives like those *Parole Him* devotes itself to as part of its overall offering, *Young Bastards*,[205] for instance. Future application of my concepts could also venture beyond web-based productions (many of which are also available on DVD) to account for features that include Raging Stallions’ *Guard Control* and Titan Men’s *Bad Cop*. And of course there is also the heteroporn versions of in-custody abuse that warrant their own study – i.e., *Shoplyfter*[206] –, in particular by way of how gender and power might be performed differently in such texts.

In adding my depth reading of *Parole Him* to the gay abuse porn schema, I do so with the aim to advance scholarly work on an abuse porn typology and equally to nuance how we might interpret the text itself and the genre I have connected it with. So, in short, with intentions toward both those studying and those watching: the visual nature of *Jump Cut* and filmic literacy of its readership of which is ideally suited to this dual aim. I see no inherent harm in texts such as *Parole Him*, or other examples of ‘abuse porn.’ Yet equally, such a position does not close off more critical avenues of analysis, as my reading of *Czech Gay Fantasy* and the ethics bound up in its unique spectatorial position reveals. That is to say, I am not



CCTV POV and fuckable felons concepts could be applied to broader gay porn contexts, such as the public-prank geared *Gay Violations* ...



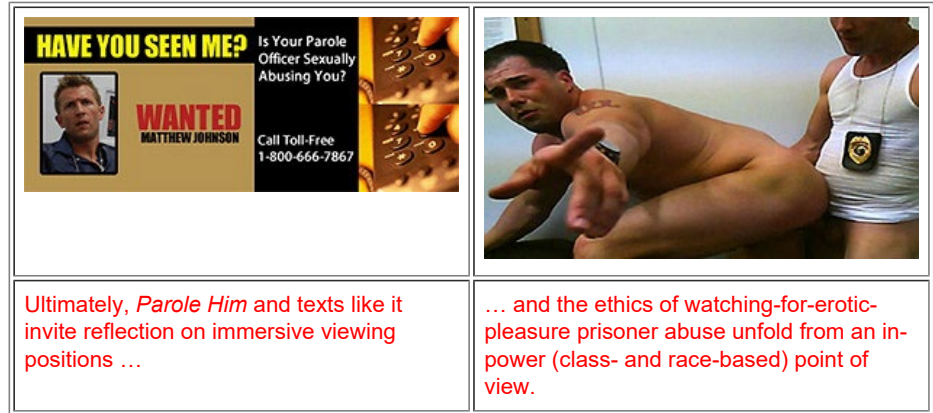
... or a site like *Young Bastards*, which has prison settings as part of its overall ‘rough sex’ offering.





Heteroporn equivalents such as *Shoplyfter* (which appears to be a gender-switch version of *Young Perps*) warrant their own study.

uncritical in my assessment, as consideration of the increasingly extreme development of the genre is important to monitor and study. Important especially, I believe, given the distinctly audience-focused nature of these texts' gaze, which encourages immersion in the fantasy abuse and construction of the incarcerated men as fuckable and deserving of objectification. With such immersion comes, I think, necessary reflection on the ethics of utilizing certain textual and filmic techniques in order to melt technology-aided surveillance with viewer voyeurism.



In a pinch, *Parole Him* and other texts belonging to the in-custody abuse porn genre pose questions about the ethics of watching-for-erotic-pleasure prisoner abuse unfold from an in-power (class- and race-based) point of view. Texts of this kind are composed via a presentation format and through documentary techniques that draw from the visual and textual rhetoric of the archival document; recognition of which reveals the clear-coded realist agenda of these texts. An agenda aided by factual-technique-adoption that invites those viewing to call into question the one characteristic that makes these texts' very existence permissible, namely that *this is fantasy*.

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## Notes

1. [parolehim.com](http://parolehim.com). [[return to page 1](#)]
- 2.1 [parolehim.com/about.html](http://parolehim.com/about.html) (accessed 19 May 2017).
3. See Brennan, 2016
4. [fraternityx.com](http://fraternityx.com).
5. [sketchysex.com](http://sketchysex.com).
6. Ibid., 388.
7. Ibid.
8. PH#.
9. As part of my analysis I did view full (subscription) versions of each scene to ensure that the scene previews (publicly available) reflected the full-length (subscription only) counterparts. I found that the scene previews available free via the open site conveyed the narrative of each scene and were an abridged version of the subscription view, capturing succinctly the narrative leading to the sex, and key aspects of the sex itself. Hence I chose to focus on this publicly viewable content so that readers could visit the site for themselves in line with my argument and would be able to access the texts analysed without needing to purchase a subscription.
10. Tziallas.
11. Baron.
12. Brennan, 2017a.
13. [parolehim.com/about.html](http://parolehim.com/about.html) (accessed 29 May 2017).
14. [parolehim.com/about.html](http://parolehim.com/about.html) (accessed 19 May 2017).
15. See Brennan, 2016; Brennan, 2018.
16. In 2014, *Fraternity X* and *Sketchy Sex* were ranked 19th and 35th respectively on a list of the forty most visited gay pornographic websites (see Brennan, 2016, 396).
17. Tyler.
18. See Mercer, 2004.
19. Video: PH02.
20. Ibid.
21. Video: PH03.

22. PH15.
23. PH17.
24. Video: PH18.
25. See Mercer, 2004.
26. PH08.
27. PH18.
28. PH03.
29. PH21.
30. PH16.
31. PH15.
32. PH06.
33. PH19.
34. PH13.
35. PH19.
36. PH13.
37. E.g., PH04.
38. See Young for discussion of the ‘radical dichotomy’ between tops and bottoms, penetrative and receptive positions in his reading of *Gag the Fag* <[link:gagthefag.com](http://link:gagthefag.com)>.
39. See Neal.
40. [str8togay.com](http://str8togay.com).
41. [men.com](http://men.com).
42. PH15.
43. For an introduction to the gay-for-pay category, see Mercer, 2011.
44. [str8chaser.com](http://str8chaser.com).
45. Video: PH14.
46. Ibid.
47. Dalton, 104.
48. 134.
49. See PH05, PH19 and PH21.
50. 2004, 151. [[return to page 2](#)]
51. Ibid., 166.
52. Ibid., 152.
53. See Brennan, 2017a, 427–429.
54. [boyshalfwayhouse.com](http://boyshalfwayhouse.com).



55. I name *Parole Him* as an example of the abuse porn genre in an earlier article (see Brennan, 2017a, 428).

56. 1994.

57. Travis.

58. 1994, 49.

59. 1994, 50.

60. Mercer, 2006, 154.

61. Escoffier, 205–226.

62. Dyer, 1986, 17.

63. PH06; also see PH07, PH15.

64. See [falconstudios.com/en/dvds/views/prisons/220](http://falconstudios.com/en/dvds/views/prisons/220) for Falcon's 'prisons' category, for instance (accessed 29 May 2017).

65. [baitbus.com](http://baitbus.com). Scholarly attention for this site includes Brennan, 2017c, 63–64; Mercer, 2011; Morris and Paasonen, 227.

66. 270.

67. Ibid.

68. [urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=bubba](http://urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=bubba) (accessed 21 May 2017).

69. A *Boston Globe* survey (see Sennott, 1994, 22), for instance, found 50% agreement with the statement “society accepts prison rape as part of the price criminals pay for their wrongdoing.”

70. See Eigenberg and Baro.

71. See 219–220.

72. See Robertson.

73. See Brennan, 2017b.

74. Ibid., 536.

75. Ibid., 521.

76. Ibid., 531.

77. 86.

78. Steckmesser, 145.

79. See Huggan.

80. 130.

81. PH05, PH07, PH15.

82. See Cunningham, 56.

83. PH07.

84. PH15.

85. PH20.
86. PH21.
87. PH16.
88. PH17.
89. PH15.
90. PH20.
91. PH22.
92. PH16.
93. Ibid.
94. PH06.
95. PH09.
96. Video: PH15.
97. Video: PH16.
98. See 2012, 319–322.
99. Ibid., 320.
100. Ibid.
101. See Brennan, 2016.
102. Ibid., 391.
103. For the site's compliance statement, see [parolehim.com/2257.html](http://parolehim.com/2257.html) (accessed 22 May 2017).
104. Boone.
105. Ibid.
106. Use of the term 'pornifying' in the present essay points to a process whereby certain practices or cultures become pornographic and is comparable to phrases such as the 'pornification' of gay culture (see Maddison, 140–143).
107. See Penfold-Mounce, 2009.
108. Mercer, 2004, 156; also see Miller for discussion of the homoerotic potentialities of masculine sport.
109. See Brennan, 2016.
110. Emphasis original; 7. [[return to page 3](#)]
111. 141.
112. See Barthes.
113. Baron, 141.
114. 422.
115. See Crago, 113.

116. Ibid.

117. Daigle appeared in series 10 of the American *Big Brother* (2008, CBS). He made his gay porn debut in 2010 as the star of *Steven Daigle XXXposed* (LaRue 2010).

118. 71.

119. Ibid., 71.

120. PH07.

121. PH18.

122. PH20.

123. Tibbals, 128.

124. PH15.

125. Jones, 134.

126. In Heller-Nicholas, 14.

127. For cinema, see Branigan.

128. See Brodesco.

129. 420.

130. [menpov.com](http://menpov.com).

131. Brennan, 2017a, 429.

132. See Brennan, 2016, 387.

133. See Brennan, 2019.

134. [czechhunter.com](http://czechhunter.com).

135. [debttdandy.com](http://debttdandy.com).

136. [dirtyscout.com](http://dirtyscout.com).

137. [czechgayfantasy.com](http://czechgayfantasy.com).

138. See Brinkema.

139. I.e., Jensen, 109.

140. Hitchcock in Truffaut, 216. [[return to page 4](#)]

141. 1972.

142. See Palmer.

143. In Truffaut, 214.

144. 163.

145. 93.

146. PH01.

147. Ibid.

148. PH15.



149. [parolehim.com/about.html](http://parolehim.com/about.html) (accessed 22 May 2017).
150. PH14.
151. [collegeboyphysicals.com](http://collegeboyphysicals.com).
152. [gaymedics.com](http://gaymedics.com).
153. See Goodyear-Smith and Buetow.
154. Lillie, 33.
155. See 63–64.
156. Lillie, 33.
157. For some common desexualization strategies within this context, see Giuffre and Williams.
158. Lillie, 33.
159. 37.
160. 48.
161. Brennan, 2018.
162. I.e., Kendall.
163. See my (Brennan, 2018) discussion of the complexities of distinguishing pornographic fantasy in the digital age.
164. See Corneau and van der Meulen, 501–504.
165. [youngperps.com](http://youngperps.com). [[return to page 5](#)]
166. Tyler.
167. By ‘pornish’ I mean more manifestly identifiable as pornographic fantasy, with clearer gay porn tropes (the daddy persona, for instance).
168. Case No. 1808042-94. Simply number hereafter.
169. 3452312.
170. 1710006-42.
171. 1710006-42 included.
172. E.g., 171003-21.
173. [itsgonnahurt.com](http://itsgonnahurt.com).
174. I.e., 3452312.
175. [gaypatrol.com](http://gaypatrol.com).
176. Spongberg, 23.
177. In “Serial Tagger gets caught in the Act.”
178. [stripsearchhell.com](http://stripsearchhell.com).
179. [thecastingroom.net](http://thecastingroom.net).

180. [brutaltops.com](http://brutaltops.com).
181. [breederfuckers.com](http://breederfuckers.com).
182. 2017, 119–122.
183. Ibid., 121.
184. See Brennan, 2016.
185. See Phillips for consideration of the U.S. domestic prisons context.
186. 24.
187. 2018.
188. [guysinlockup.com](http://guysinlockup.com).
189. [guysinlockup.com/?mb=QXJoaWNsZXxJbmZvfEFib3Vo](http://guysinlockup.com/?mb=QXJoaWNsZXxJbmZvfEFib3Vo) (accessed 22 May 2017).
190. [ironlockup.com](http://ironlockup.com).
191. [jaillust.com](http://jaillust.com).
192. [str8hell.com](http://str8hell.com).
193. [str8hell.com/category/airport-security](http://str8hell.com/category/airport-security) (accessed 22 May 2017).
194. [str8hell.com/category/young-offenders](http://str8hell.com/category/young-offenders) (accessed 22 May 2017).
195. 56.
196. Ibid.
197. Ibid.
198. See Brennan, 2017a.
199. See Brennan, 2016.
200. See Brennan, 2019.
201. 124.
202. [outinpublic.com](http://outinpublic.com).
203. [rubhim.com](http://rubhim.com).
204. [gayviolations.com](http://gayviolations.com).
205. [youngbastards.com](http://youngbastards.com).
206. [shoplyfter.com](http://shoplyfter.com).

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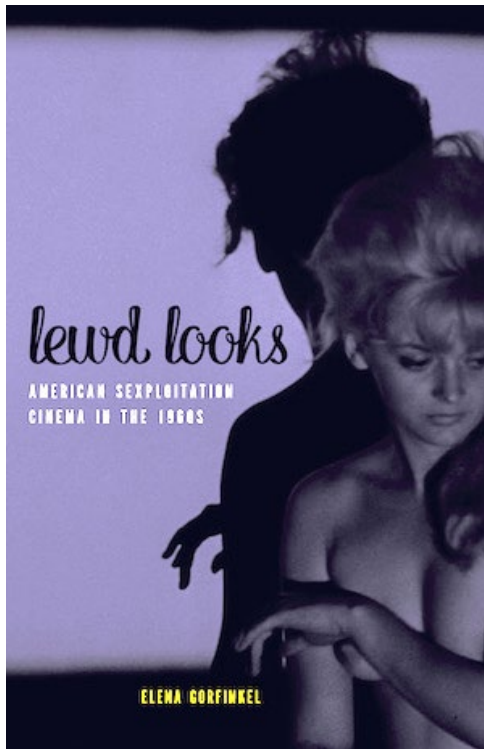
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## Guilty expenditure and the implicit image in 1960s sexploitation cinema

review by [Kevin John Bozelka](#)

Elena Gorfinkel, *Lewd Looks: American Sexploitation Cinema in the 1960s*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017. 320 pages, 44 b&w photos, \$28.00 paper ISBN 978-1-5179-0017-5.

Watching 1960s sexploitation films in an era of onscreen (as opposed to obscenity, to tweak a phrase of Linda Williams) can leave a viewer bewildered. Today one can take in ever more frenzied visuals via pornography that utilizes speculums, creampie (internal money shots), virtual reality, etc. to foster the illusion of the deepest burrowing into the truth of sex. From this vantage point, one cannot help but wonder what pleasures could be derived from sexploitation films that shunt much of the sexual activity and sometimes even nudity off-screen.

Elena Gorfinkel's astonishing book *Lewd Looks: American Sexploitation Cinema in the 1960s* seeks, in part, to drain some of the historical chauvinism out of the notion that viewers of 1960s sexploitation films were naïve explorers who had to settle for implicit images before the explosion of hardcore pornography marked by the popularity of *Deep Throat* in 1972. At once a reception study, an industry analysis, a history, and a series of textual analyses, *Lewd Looks* lends sexploitation the kind of thick description the genre has so sorely lacked in film scholarship. It provides a much-needed bridge between two previous canonical works in porn studies — Eric Schaefer's *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959* and Linda Williams' *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible."* Best of all, *Lewd Looks* offers a glimpse into the audiences of sexploitation films, their negotiations and their place at a particular point in the history of sexual representation.



Speculum porn brings you ever closer to the “truth” of sex. *The Spit and the Speculum* (Mike Adriano, 2011)

Quite Foucauldian in its perspective, *Lewd Looks*’ first chapter concerns the ways in which various forms of censorship produced sexploitation’s unique generic syntax. The 1957 Supreme Court ruling *Roth v. United States* defined obscenity via a test:

“whether to the average person, applying contemporary community standards, the dominant theme of the material as a whole appeals to prurient interest” (38).

Literary works like *Ulysses* and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* benefited most from this ruling since only certain passages, rather than the works as a whole, could appeal to prurient interest. Sexploitation filmmakers, however, had a much more difficult time convincing state and city censor boards that their films did not slip into the obscene. Therefore, they appeased the boards by keeping nudity a tease and all sexual activity implicit, the hallmarks of the sexploitation genre. Gorfinkel suggests that the advent in the mid-1960s of the “roughies,” a sexploitation subgenre trafficking in heavier violence and sadomasochism, can be traced to filmmakers exploiting the censor boards’ relative leniency with respect to violence.



Pornography that requires a virtual reality headset for full immersion. *The Thief* (Virtual Real Gay, 2017)

As censorship laws relaxed more in the late 1960s, however, sexploitation



An *Art Films International* essay positions boredom at the center of sexploitation spectatorship.

filmmakers were feeling competition from producers of 16mm hard core films often exhibited in store fronts. It was partially under this threat that the Adult Film Association of America (AFAA) was formed. Akin to Hollywood's creation of the Production Code, the AFAA attempted to formulate some rules to distinguish their product from the harder core variants and to stave off problems with censorship boards. Gorfinkel notes how this ultimately unsuccessful self-censoring created a generational rift between older producers of sexploitation and the younger purveyors of hard core. It captures sexploitation filmmakers at a delicate moment in history that Gorfinkel renders palpable in this brilliant passage:

“Soft-core producers in the late 1960s and early 1970s were caught in a rhetorical double bind, dependent on censorship for their business yet on the brink of losing it should content restrictions — and representational conventions of filming sex — relax enough to eclipse their specific generic trademark of leering sexuality and suggestive omission” (90).

Another way sexploitation directors tried to keep censors at bay was by structuring their films around what Gorfinkel calls “guilty expenditure,” the subject of the second chapter. Stories of “guilty expenditure” concern characters who indulge in sexual activity but not without a price – loss of innocence, legal trouble, even death. This narrative mode worked subtly in the “nudie cuties” of the early 1960s. A film like *The Immoral Mr. Teas* (Russ Meyer, 1959) cocooned the viewer from any guilt in consuming images of scantily clad women by providing a gawking corollary in the film itself, here, the nebbish Mr. Teas and his x-ray vision.



The viewer looks via the lewd looks of *The Immoral Mr. Teas* (Russ Meyer, 1959).



Lorna's longing for sexual pleasures will have deadly consequences in *Lorna* (Russ Meyer, 1964).

“Guilty expenditure” gained traction with the “roughies” in which leering morphed into sexual violence, a trajectory typified by another Meyer film, *Lorna* (1964). These tales on the price of sin constitute a reticent engagement with the sexual revolution of the 1960s and paints a more much complex portrait of the decade than commentators usually allow.

By the late 1960s, however, sexploitation films, especially those directed by Radley Metzger and Joseph Sarno, focused more on female desire. As Gorfinkel notes in the third chapter, Helen Gurley Brown's advice book *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962) had a great deal of influence on this aspect of sexploitation cinema. As a guide to single working women, *Sex and the Single Girl* compelled women to





Lounging on a sofa in *Bad Girls Go to Hell* (Doris Wishman, 1965).

seek sexual as well as economic freedom, the ostensible subject of many sexploitation films. In these late-1960s entries in the genre, women move to the city for work or they remain at home in the suburbs as unsatisfied wives. Coupled with the relaxing of censorship laws, though, the narrative in these films becomes unraveled as filmmakers take advantage of this leniency by maximizing the spectacle of female nudity and simulated sexual activity. It is in this mode that sexploitation gained the reputation as an excruciatingly dull genre:

“The main characters spend exorbitant amounts of time lounging around, waking up and stretching, getting dressed and getting undressed, and languidly writhing on beds, couches, and chairs, caressing themselves either for a camera or for their own pleasure” (183-184).

But easily the best chapter of *Lewd Looks* is the last on sexploitation reception. Gorfinkel has excavated a frankly jaw-dropping array of contemporary testimonials. Central to this discourse is the notion of the sexploitation spectator as a dupe. For who else could sit through 70 minutes of sultry but near-nihilistic lounging around? But an article from *Art Films International*, a publication catering to the highbrow connoisseur of cinema, proposes that sexploitation’s very dullness safeguards any prurient interest and affords the viewer the disinterested distance associated with art cinema reception and necessary for intellectual discernment. Gorfinkel also uncovers a newsletter for sexploitation fans called *Artisex*, created to address sexploitation’s reputation for cheating the viewer. Reviews in *Artisex* judged films not only on sexual explicitness and the sexiness of the female characters but also on production values. The existence of *Artisex* puts lie to the idea of sexploitation viewers as raincoat-sporting rubes.



*Artisex*, the consumer report for the discerning sexploitation viewer.

My only qualm with this excellent book is that I wish there were more of an appreciation for the sheer weirdness of sexploitation films. Gorfinkel admits her fandom when she discusses becoming entranced with the baffling films of Doris Wishman. But too little of that wonder travels throughout the book.



Baffling point of view in *Bad Girls Go to Hell* (Doris Wishman, 1965).

A more precise sense of how stasis and repetition leaves the narrative structure of these films in tatters would be appreciated. But that is a minor complaint in this well-researched and insightful addition to porn studies.

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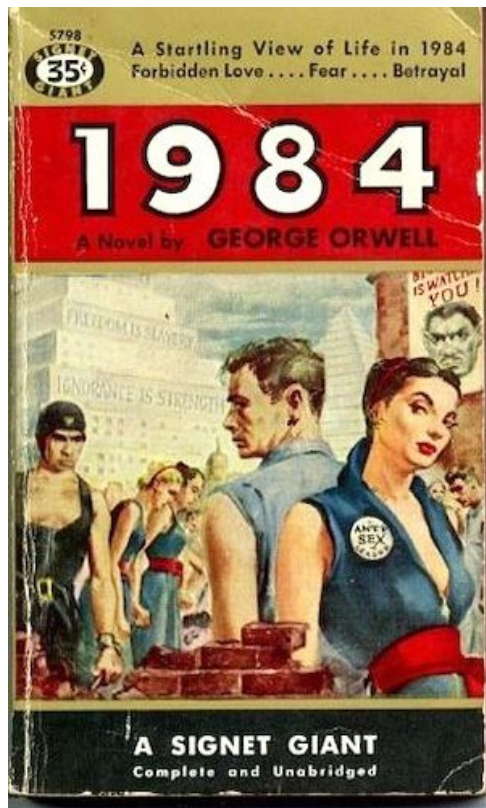
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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



For the previous generation, the classic text on surveillance.

## On "surveillance capitalism"

review by [Victor Wallis](#)

Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future and the New Frontier of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019)

Shoshana Zuboff offers us the “Big Other” as the successor to George Orwell’s “Big Brother.” But where Orwell’s all-seeing monstrosity (from his 1948 novel *1984*) was a projection into the future, Zuboff’s phantasm – the “hive” in which surveillance capitalism has us largely trapped – is a documented investigation of current U.S. reality.

Her book takes off from a recognition that the various forms of electronic social networking are, above all else, channels through which “service providers” accumulate commercially relevant information about their users. Zuboff theorizes this observation by arguing that we the users – a category she treats as including all the rest of the population – are thereby commodified. Our habits and feelings become an infinite storehouse of data, allowing the system’s managers to anticipate our every impulse and hence to predict and shape virtually all our routine activities.

The book focuses only marginally on the directly political uses of surveillance technology, referring briefly to post-9/11 censorship. There is no reference to the tracking of dissidents (as with placing individuals inexplicably on a “no fly” list). Nor does Zuboff discuss campaign advertising or, more broadly, the shaping of public opinion on specific political issues. The examples she gives of intelligence-collection pertain almost entirely to the private sector – to selling and buying. In their aggregate, however, these nonetheless have a political impact, insofar as they reinforce daily anxieties and foster a general culture of conformity. One of the more astounding instances she describes is the “Sleep Number bed,” which adjusts the firmness of its mattress in accordance with readings of your heart rate, your breathing, and your body motion. Perhaps even more blatantly intrusive is the car-insurance program that, beyond making continuous while-you-drive adjustments to your premium-charges, prevents your car from starting if you have fallen behind in your payments. As Zuboff notes (239), the plethora of individually targeted goods and services evolves into “a network of coercions, in which mundane functions are ransomed for behavioral surplus.”

Behavioral surplus is what Zuboff pinpoints as the basis for the super-profits of Google, Facebook, *et al.*; she defines it as “behavioral data available for uses *beyond* service improvement” (75).[1] [\[open endnotes in new page\]](#) It is the “free raw material [as noted in the book’s prefatory definition of surveillance capitalism] for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sale.” The scramble to capture this surplus is the new frontier of corporate competition, in which, going beyond earlier forms of advertising, businesses are now – through mobile devices, including some that are wearable or implantable – insinuating their wares into every phase of our existence. The result, as Zuboff puts it (10), is that “we now pay for our own domination.” Situating this condition historically, she writes:

“ownership of the new means of behavioral modification eclipses





Cell tower disguised as tree.



Steel signs available on amazon.com for \$14.95 to "alert employees and visitors that they are being watched."



Available from Cabela hunting and fishing catalogue: "Keeping your trail camera hidden is key to your hunting success. Make sure that no

ownership of the means of production as the fountainhead of capitalist wealth and power in the twenty-first century" (11).

This formulation encapsulates what I think is the key issue posed by Zuboff's treatise: To what extent does surveillance capitalism represent a fundamental break with any earlier embodiment of capitalism? Her 700-page book richly describes all the new practices and devotes ample space to the arguments of those who conceived and engineered them (notably, B.F. Skinner, Alex Pentland, and Google CEO Eric Schmidt). Zuboff unambiguously rejects the overall scenario to which the "advances" in question have led. She sees them essentially as entailing the crushing of individuality by an all-encompassing and highly concentrated force ("the regime of instrumentarian power") – a development that she pointedly assimilates (citing Hannah Arendt) with the tradition of totalitarianism.

But does all this constitute *a departure from or an extension of* capitalism's earlier ("industrial") stage? The answer to this question has practical implications in terms of whether – and how – surveillance capitalism can be overcome.

In her descriptive narrative, Zuboff highlights what is new and distinctive about the surveillance stage. Everything points toward heightened infringement on the human personality. Even as advertising becomes increasingly customized, the scope for real personal autonomy is drastically reduced. The omniscient "instrumentarian" managers carry out behavior modification on a vast scale. "The indeterminacy of social processes" gives way to "the determinism of programmed machine processes" (221). Along similar lines, we are stripped of the power to set our respective life-courses, as "surveillance capitalism offers a new template for our future: the machine hive in which our future is forfeit to perfect knowledge administered for others' profit" (443). Again,

"the elemental *right to the future tense* is endangered by a pervasive digital architecture of behavior modification..." (332).

Correspondingly, as uncertainty disappears, so does freedom – a shift embodied in what Zuboff calls the "uncontract," which "abandons the human world of legally binding contracts and substitutes instead the positivist calculations of automatic machine processes" (333). Finally,

"Industrial capitalism followed its own logic of shock and awe, taking aim at nature to conquer 'it' in the interests of capital; now surveillance capitalism has *human nature* in its sights" (346).

one, hunter or animal, has any idea where your camera is hiding thanks to Stic-N-Pic's mini screw-in-tree mount."



2018 article in *The Independent*.  
[www.independent.co.uk](http://www.independent.co.uk).

As this last statement reminds us, Zuboff frequently notes (although without going into detail) the destructive impact that capitalism has had on the natural environment. She also highlights, at every point, the thoroughly capitalistic drive behind the stripping away of individual autonomy. To this extent, her book can be added to the many resources available for informing a radical political critique. But although she recognizes today's surveillance society as capitalistic, she appears to assume that its surveillance aspects can be transcended without challenging the capitalist framework within which they were introduced. She thus asks, in her Introduction, whether surveillance capitalism will "continue on its current trajectory to become the dominant logic of accumulation in our age," or whether it will instead turn out to be "a fearsome but ultimately doomed dead end in capitalism's longer journey" (14).

Excluded from this either/or is the logical third option: that of discarding or overturning capitalism. This exclusion corresponds to Zuboff's analysis in which the potential for effective agency resides only in the ruling class (a term she does not use). She treats the rest of the population as an undifferentiated mass. She does not draw distinctions within it – either within U.S. society or between the U.S. and other countries – in terms of its subjection to and/or its capacity to eventually manage (or dismantle) the instruments of social control whose applications she describes. She occasionally refers to democracy but presupposes a capitalist framework. She claims that "capitalism responds to the needs of people [which people?] in a time and place" (31). Citing Joseph Schumpeter's concept of "mutations" within capitalism, she writes,

"Mutation is not a fairy tale; it is rational capitalism, bound in reciprocity with its populations through democratic institutions" (52).

It is to Zuboff's credit that despite her insistence on the contrast between "industrial" (or "rational") capitalism and "surveillance" capitalism, her account confirms their underlying oneness in the overarching drive for profit and accumulation. Her imagining of a future in which capitalism might shed (even if only in part) its "surveillance" aspects may perhaps be attributed to the insufficient attention she gives to the larger economic trends within which the Google/Facebook/Amazon/Microsoft complex came into its position of dominance. If we look at these larger trends – of capitalist concentration, expansion, and perpetual innovation – we see immediately the expression of a built-in drive which, unless stopped by a massive oppositional force, moves only in a single direction. (An alarming dimension of the surveillance society that Zuboff fails to mention is the prodigious infrastructure of micro-radiation, whose magnitude and consequent threat to public health multiplies with every new technological advance in the instrumentality of control.)[2]

Envisioning a restored "non-surveillance" stage of capitalism is like thinking of returning capitalism to its pre-monopoly or pre-state-interventionist stages. In all these scenarios, one is implicitly assuming that those who ran the earlier version had no common interest with those who instituted the later version. But just as capital becomes ever more concentrated and just as it increasingly relies on state support for its agenda, so also is it now driven, in a period of ecological exhaustion and rising misery, to seek ever greater guarantees of control over its populations. For the populations to challenge those controls, which are what define the surveillance stage of capitalism, they must challenge the power of capital. Not to do so is, at this moment in history, to accept the destruction of life.

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## Notes

1. All italics within quotations are as in the original text. [[return to text](#)]
2. On “5G” or 5th generation wireless technology, see <https://www.radiationhealthrisks.com/5g-radiation-dangers/>

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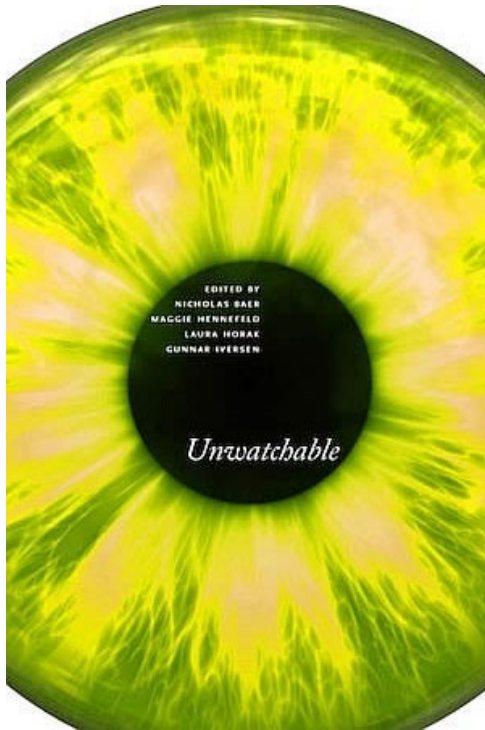
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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The editors of *Unwatchable* (Rutgers UP, 2019) ask: "What does it mean to proclaim a media object "unwatchable": disturbing, revolting, poor, tedious, or literally inaccessible? And unwatchable to whom?"



Extreme films often considered "un stomachable" — such as Gaspar Noé's *Irreversible* (2002), which centers upon the depiction of a brutal, vicious rape — are watched and analyzed alongside everything from canonical avant-garde films to "precious" recent art films to the media's coverage of Donald Trump.

## Unwatchable, but highly readable

review by Michael Arnzen

Baer, Nicholas, Hennefeld, Maggie, Horak, Laura and Iversen, Gunnar, Eds. *Unwatchable*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2019. 412 pp. \$21.34.

*Unwatchable*, a fascinating anthology of short film criticism and media theory published earlier this year by Rutgers University Press, asks of its fifty or so contributors a very simple question: *What does it mean for a visual text to be "unwatchable"?*

As you might imagine, the answer is complex, for "watching" does not just mean looking, but—usually—scrutinizing with some kind of intention. Thus to be "unwatchable" means to be a text that resists or denies the spectator's ability to see what they are looking for... if the spectator isn't already refusing to even look in the first place. Sometimes this denial is physical and objective in a way that obfuscates vision (like censor bars or scratched film); more often it is a term defined by a subjective desire (conscious or not) to *look away*. There is unwatchable footage, scratched and eroded by the violence of time. And there is unwatchable footage, scratched and eroded by the violence of the artist in a kind of "optical torture"—and both are addressed within these pages. Then there is unwatchable content—from avant-garde texts which viciously challenge expectations or strain the spectator's patience, generating anxiety about what it is they are looking at—to exploitative texts which play boldly to base desires or cruel ideologies and strain the spectator's ethical patience, generating anxiety about their complicity with what it is they are looking at.

One of the lessons of *Unwatchable* is that anxiety—personal, cultural, historical—propels the spectator to look away or fear the image they might perceive. Yet cultural criticism must stay "on watch." The wide range of contributions to *Unwatchable* allow us to peek between our fingers and consider films we might otherwise never watch on our own, to great success.

In fact, *Unwatchable* is a very strong collection because it boldly lifts the veil on unwatchable films that most people have only heard about but have never seen for themselves. Yet its strength lies in the way it theorizes the matter, rather than just exploring a catalogue of films that make audiences uncomfortable. Nearly all of the authors explore why such discomfort exists in the first place (while also remaining attentive to the thrills as much as the pains of discomfort, such as in extreme horror cinema, as well).

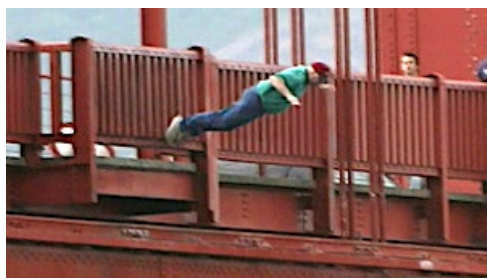
The book is large at 388 pages, with about 60 contributors peeking behind the curtain of so many films the average reader probably has never seen. Everyone from popular sex journalists (Susie Bright) to familiar film theorists (Vivian Sobchack, Noel Carroll) to specialist projectionists (Bennet Toggler) and trans performance artists (Alok Vaid-Menon) come to the table, offering up very brief (750-1500 word) essays on the subject. While the diverse angles of inquiry is wide-ranging, generally I found that most of the writers raise one of three questions: *Why I personally won't watch X* (often for political reasons); *Why we*



One of the few things you'll "see" in Guy Debord's *Howls for Sade* (1952) is a leader tape arrow to inform you that you are actually "watching" a film, even if nearly the entirety is composed of black screen.



Duration is a key component of watchability. How long can you stand to watch the Empire State Building through Andy Warhol's unmoving camera in his epic-length *Empire* (1964)?



"What if one of my students kills themselves because I screened this film?" asks contributor, Jennifer Malkowski, regarding *The Bridge* (2006) — a documentary that assembles a year's worth of footage of jumpers from the Golden Gate Bridge.

*don't really want to watch X* (often in defense of our identity or desire); or *Why X is purposely unpleasurable to experience* (often because the avant-garde or provocative artist is straining the pleasures attached to the visual apparatus). The way these questions and the answers posed overlap are fascinating. All of the essays are very short. And even the weakest among them—the smattering of personal preference pieces in which the writer muses defensively about their biases and why they refuse to screen certain films—serve to encourage the reader to question their own limits when it comes to engaging with visual texts that might be privately troubling or socially deemed unsuitable for viewing, whether for ethical, political, sensory or affective reasons.

The book feels timely, as the editors suggest the issue of "unwatchability" is ignited by the rise of accessibility to violent, traumatizing images in viral videos as much as footage of terrorism and tragedy in the news, on top of the recent wave of extreme horror films and the perverse politicking around "fake news." After their introduction—which gracefully problematizes the term "unwatchable" and artfully places this concept in an array of aesthetic and philosophical frameworks—the book allows its contributors to each grapple with the term in their own way in brief essays (each writer is usually given no longer than three-four pages each) which reveals so many facets to what it means to watch, as much as not watch, media. Helpfully, the anthology of thinkpieces by established media critics is organized well, consisting of three main sections: Violence and Testimony; Histories and Genres; and Spectators and Objects.

The topics under study range from news footage taken from unmanned drone strikes to protest films literally about watching paint dry, on top of infamously provocative genre titles (*Irreversible* and *Salo, or the 120 Days of Sodom*), to examinations of the equivalent of snuff films (such as *The Bridge*—which documents a year's worth of suicidal leaps from the Golden Gate Bridge), cult zombie films and obscure fetish porn. Sneering references to Donald Trump appear often enough throughout the book to make the reader chuckle, but a few of the authors perform direct analyses of journalistic election/presidential coverage. These analyses drive home the notion that we truly are in a culture where we must stay alert and "on guard" (i.e. on watch) about the images we see—and yet stand against those who would obscure our vision of truth or avert our gaze from reality altogether by turning the media camera off or away as a political act.

While movies and memes that rub a spectator's nose in viscera and violence are more obvious focal points for unwatchability (and the editors pull in some of the best critics on the subject), some themes emerge in a reading of this collection that are literally eye-opening. With chapters on "Bearing Witness," "Enduring the Avant-Garde" and "Tedious Whiteness," one can see that a key element of unwatchability is temporality—that is, duration. Even with just a still image (Warhol's 10 hour epic still camera shot of the Empire State Building, *Empire* (1964) or a black screen (Debord's 75 minute black screen picture, *Howls for Sade* (1952)), several of the essays in this book return to the notion that we can only stand watching images for so long before anxiety is produced. The same holds true of politically oppressive or inhumane images, historically. We learn from reading *Unwatchable* that there are benefits to looking at what we might otherwise be averse to, and that we need artists like Warhol and Debord to remind us of this—but also that there is only so much we can take. The most daring of these films challenge us and incite us to change or open up our worldview.

A book that purely focused on avant-garde optical destruction and nihilistic "gore-no" films would perhaps be unreadable. But the book counter-balances these extremes by including eclectic essays on such topics as the unendurably "precious" film (such as Gondry's *Science of Sleep* (2006)), biopics featuring





"Precious cinema...traps itself in the cute world of its own imaginative eccentricities." Contributor Julian Hanich suggests some films are so narcissistic they are unwatchable.



In *Lincoln* (2012), do you see Lincoln, or do you see Daniel Day-Lewis? Contributor Jeffrey Sconce proclaims in his title that "The Biopic is an Affront to the Cinema" due to its sustained masquerade over history, privileging the star system over the truth.

actors who upstage their subjects (*Lincoln* (2012)), and even stunt youtube videos ("What Could Go Wrong?," 2017). The *Unwatchable*, apparently, isn't so much a media genre as it is an enduring framework for understanding aversion. Just as Freud quipped that "un-" is the token of repression in his essay on "The Uncanny," the authors in *Unwatchable* uncover a number of repressive and oppressive forces at play when we watch (and don't): from racial bias to entitled consumerist fantasy.

*Unwatchable* is a powerful, potent collection because of its mission to crack our fingers apart just a little bit wider to see more of what we're averse to. Thick-skinned viewers who can "watch anything" will learn more about what it is they are seeing (and not); thin-skinned spectators who avert their eyes from even the most laughable of horror films will learn more about what it is they are choosing to be ignorant about when they cover their eyes. The act of watching is inherently a kind of voluntary education, and the only "unwatchable" text may be the film that has nothing of value (however that might be determined) to teach us. It is interesting, then, that—in addition to an excellent bibliography and filmography—the book concludes with two chapters on pedagogy, with writers looking critically at campus politics and "trigger warnings," exploring—as Katarina Kyrola puts it—"the ethical value of extreme discomfort" in an era which feels increasingly censorious.

Early in the anthology, W.J.T. Mitchell draws the distinction between seeing and watching as "passive and active poles of the scopic field. We see a lot of things that we do not watch or (more precisely) watch *for*. In fact, most of the things we watch for are things that we cannot see, things we are looking for, waiting for, trying to bring into focus" (36). *Unwatchable* brings into focus a number of issues which make it an excellent text for not merely a classroom, but any film enthusiast who perhaps privately isn't always enthusiastic about all film. Look for this book.

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# JUMP CUT

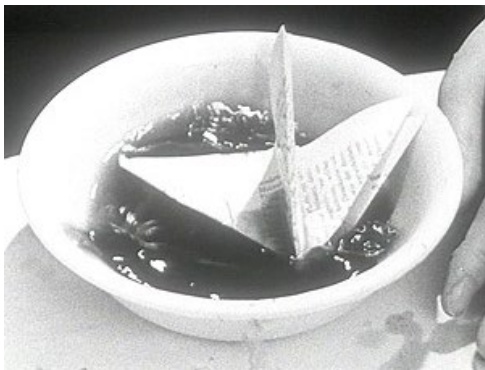
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Harun Farocki's *Worte* ("Words"): A page from Mao's "Little Red Book" becomes a projectile...



...launched against the Shah of Iran and his wife



... and landing unceremoniously in their soup ..

## Looking back at the Red Army Faction

by [Inez Hedges](#)

Christina Gerhardt, *Screening the Red Army Faction: Historical and Critical Survey*. New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, 307 pp., \$43 hardcover and e-textbook, \$40 paperback.

This eminently readable and beautifully researched book is essential reading for anyone interested in the German postwar period, from 1948 to reunification. In particular, Gerhardt's historical and cultural analysis of the formation and activities of the Red Army Faction (RAF), which operated from 1970 to 1998, acknowledges the usual explanation for its origin in youth uprisings against the failures of denazification within West Germany's post-1949 ruling class. But Gerhardt goes farther and deeper—she situates the movement within the larger international context of postcolonial struggles (Vietnam, Algeria, and other African nations) and of worldwide anti-authoritarian movements (the Iranian revolution). Her extensive archival research (for instance in the Berlin archives of the APO, or Extra-Parliamentary Opposition) and interviews with survivors of both RAF victims and perpetrators provides a sweeping and balanced view of the cultural landscape. Her close analyses of relevant films by well-known directors such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Christian Petzhold, Volker Schlöndorff and Margarethe von Trotta as well as related art by Gerhard Richter are supplemented and illuminated by the historical context she so ably presents.

In her opening chapter, Gerhardt brings a historian's understanding to the thicket of left-wing publications that sprang up around these issues. She usefully comments on the demonstrations against the visit of the Shah of Iran to Berlin in 1967, which resulted in the police killing of Benno Ohnesorg, a peaceful demonstrator. She relates how, the following year in April, future RAF members Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin set fire to a department store in Frankfurt, while future RAF member Ulrike Meinhof covered the events in the oppositional news outlet *konkret*. They were defended in court, in turn, by the lawyer and future RAF member Horst Mahler. Sentenced to prison, they were briefly liberated in 1969 under an amnesty for political prisoners, then ordered back to jail a few months later. Baader and Ensslin went underground, though Baader was later captured. Another flashpoint was the attempted assassination of Rudi Dutschke, a student leader, in April of 1968 after the ultra-conservative Springer press vilified him in the media. Gerhardt's sure-footed navigation of this fraught terrain is essential to understanding the film texts she discusses in her next three chapters.

In several close analyses of filmic texts, she shows how the "New German Cinema," as it has come to be called, is closely connected to the oppositional politics of the 1960s and 70s. When the German Film and Television Academy in Berlin was founded in the late 1970s, its first students included Harun Farocki and Helke Sander. In 1967 Farocki made a short film pillorying the Shah of Iran and celebrating the writings of Mao Tse-Tung as his actors tore out pages of Mao's Little Red Book and made them into paper airplane projectiles. The voice in the



... to the consternation of the Shah.

film is that of Helke Sander, the future director of the 1978 *Redupers: the All-Around Reduced Personality*.

Meanwhile, the RAF as well as other radical groups such as the “June 2nd movement” that had grown out of the demonstrations against the Shah, resorted increasingly to violence as a reaction against what they perceived as government collusion against world-wide liberation struggles and the one-sided criticism of anti-colonial aspirations by the establishment press. In May 1970 Andreas Baader was liberated from jail by Meinhof, Ensslin, and others. Bank holdups and bomb attacks followed. The government’s response was to double down on repressive measures, surveillance, and censorship that is represented in two major films of the period, Volker Schlöndorff’s 1975 *The Lost Honor of Katarina Blum* (based on the novel by Heinrich Böll) and the multi-authored *Germany in Autumn*. The title of the second film refers to the 1977 kidnapping and assassination by the RAF of Hanns-Martin Schleyer (president of the Confederation of German Employers’ Associations and the Federation of German Industry, as well as a former member of the Schutzstaffel SS during the Hitler era), and to the subsequent apparent prison suicides of RAF members Baader, Ensslin, Jan-Carl Raspe and Irmgard Möller in October of that year (Meinhof had been found hanged in her prison cell on May 9).

*The Lost Honor of Katarina Blum* imagines how an innocent domestic worker who meets a German military recruit gone AWOL is ensnared in a network of conspiracy theories spawned by the close collaboration of the police and the yellow journalist media. Böll’s novel and the film expose the paranoia that gripped the German nation as a result of the RAF’s and other groups’ turn to violence. Things spiral out of control and Katarina ends up shooting the reporter who is baiting her.

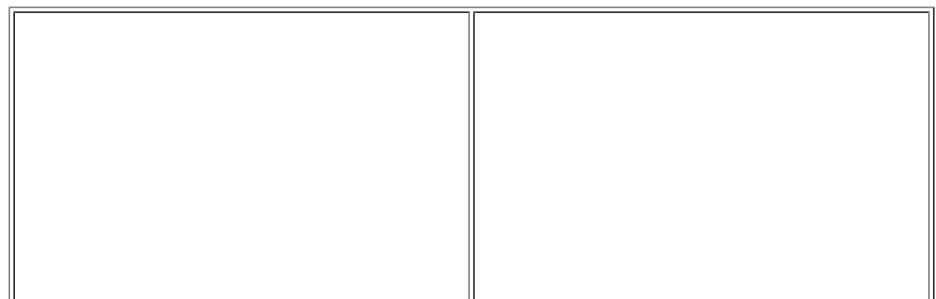


In the multi-authored *Germany in Autumn*, Antigone’s revolt is too close to current events.



Antigone’s behavior is a danger to the stability of the German state.

*Germany in Autumn* opens with documentary footage of state funeral of RAF victim Martin Schleyer and closes with footage of the burial of Baader, Ensslin and Raspe. In between there are short pieces by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Volker Schlöndorff, and others. This complex film has been analyzed by some of the major contemporary writers on German cinema—among them Miriam Hansen, Rick Rentschler, and Thomas Elsaesser. Gerhardt does a good job of finding a path through their commentaries. Importantly, she cites Alexander Kluge’s discussion of the role of film in the public sphere and argues persuasively for the importance of this particular film. Schlöndorff’s fictional representation of scene in which a TV film of Sophocles’ “Antigone” is being censored by TV executives is a successful parody of the prevailing nervousness of the period. The censors are portrayed as being unwilling to countenance any opposition to authority, even embodied in a Greek play from the 5th century BCE.







Ismene argues that Antigone should yield to the violence of the State.



Creon as the embodiment of State violence.

In the 1970s directors also made films about workers and about the rising feminist movement, issues Gerhardts explores in a separate chapter on Fassbinder's *Mother Küsters Goes to Heaven* (1975) and the trilogy of "sisters" films by Margarethe von Trotta (*The Second Awakening of Christa Klages*, 1978; *Sisters, or the Balance of Happiness*, 1979; and *Marianne and Juliane*, 1981). Here, the exclusive focus on West Germany means that she doesn't mention important East German films on workers, such as the Wittstock series by Volker Koepp from the same period. This could have added another dimension, since there were RAF members who sought refuge in East Germany (and who had their covers blown when the wall came down in 1989).

In her close analysis of *Mother Küsters Goes to Heaven*, Gerhardts offers an interesting commentary on the way that framing emphasizes the claustrophobic entrapment of the workers in their workplace and circumstances. She also highlights the melodrama and empathy with characters that defines Fassbinder's signature style. She usefully explains how the film was released with different endings for German and U.S. audiences—a happy one for the United States, a grim one for Germany.



In Von Trotta's *Marianne and Juliane*: two sisters...

Gerhardts's discussion of von Trotta's *Marianne and Juliane* demonstrates the intersection of the personal and political and shows why this film is an important statement about the choices activist women faced in the 1970s and 80s. Marianne, loosely based on Gudrun Ensslin, has gone underground; she supports the PLO and abandons her son to Juliane, who is forced to place him in foster care. The film delves into the sisters' childhoods and their different rebellions against their authoritarian father.

Gerhardts discusses how this film is a "meditation on history and memory." There are images of German women's fight for abortion rights and a scene where, as schoolchildren, their father took them to watch Alain's Resnais' Holocaust documentary *Night and Fog*. Gerhardts comments,

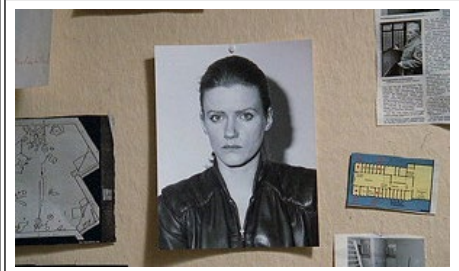
"By presenting the screening of *Night and Fog* from a variety of vantage points, the film calls attention to the relationship between historical events and familial history." [187]



... are on divergent paths.



Juliane joins demonstrations for women's



....while Marianne becomes a wanted

rights...



Juliane visits Marianne in prison.

underground revolutionary.



Juliane learns on TV of her sister's death in prison.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of a related film by Christian Petzhold, an early collaborator of Farocki's and now head of the German Film and Television Academy in Berlin, *The State I Am in* (2000). The stress in Petzhold's film is laid on the daughter of two activists living in the underground and the incompatibility between their way of life and their daughter's needs.

Films about the RAF continued after reunification. In a chapter on terrorism and the cold war, Gerhardt comments on the way Schlöndorff's *The Legend of Rita* (2000, co-written with East German Director Wolfgang Kohlhaase) explored the fate of RAF members who were left exposed after the wall came down, with nowhere to go for asylum. Gerhardt comments that the film "can be read critically as a heritage film that seeks to produce consensus, a post-wall West-East German collaboration." Yet she also notes that by focusing on Rita's life in East Germany, the film eclipses the international arena within which the RAF operated, its ties to postcolonial and anti-capitalist struggles.



Schlöndorff's *The Legend of Rita* deals with members of the RAF in Paris, ...



... their jailbreak and escape to the GDR.



After the wall: a futile defense of socialism.



Nowhere to flee: Rita on her death ride.

A final chapter moves away from film to discuss the controversies enveloping Gerhard Richter's painting series, "October 18, 1977" (first exhibited in 1989) and an exhibition in Berlin on the RAF in 2005. Richter's paintings consist of large oils referencing newspaper photographs of the capture of Gudrun Ensslin, images of her death by hanging in her jail cell, and the funeral in 1977 of three RAF members after their apparent suicides in a maximum security German prison. Gerhardt describes Richter's exhibition, which aroused considerable controversy

in Germany, as a way of working through trauma. The artist washes out the focus in the photographs so that they seem to be blurred, a work of mourning and a reference to the receding sharpness of memory.

For readers like myself who lived through this era, Gerhardt's book fills in many lacunae and provides explanation and context for one's individual experience. For those "born later" (in Brecht's phrase) *Screening the Red Army Faction*, which is accompanied by an extensive bibliography, is an indispensable resource and guide to the complex currents that have shaped postwar Germany.

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## The Last Word

The Last Word has traditionally been the spot in *Jump Cut* for a political editorial, yet I do not feel quite up to that task. After Chuck died in December 2017, I could not deal with the sorry news of the Trump era in the United States and had to shut it out of my daily life just to maintain my sanity. Interestingly, however, a whole new way of moving through the world has opened up, or rather I just keep going, ready or not, through the world of grief. And it is a world that demands constant learning, about myself and others, about death, about the rich world of old people. So, I jot here a few words in a personal vein, since just keeping working on one more issue of *Jump Cut*, as well as trying to organize and set up an archive for Chuck's library and writing, are what is keeping me going.

Mostly my life without Chuck is empty. I am enough of a Buddhist to welcome emptiness. Like negative space in Chinese art, it's quite beautiful. But I also know that this emptiness surrounds me because I have lost married woman privilege. In my twenties, other young women, themselves recently married, explained this phenomenon to me, and my experience has been much as they described. A world and a social acceptance open up to a woman when she gets married, especially for moving around in public space, with things such as going out at night, eating in restaurants, taking long trips—all easier as a couple. I've always known the sexist ideology behind this but am experiencing it once again. In fact, much of my life reverts to habits of my twenties, especially turning night into day and vice versa. I get up in the middle of every night and often work on *Jump Cut*.

Another lesson I had to learn was that death and this terrible grief were waiting for Chuck and me. We lived within the great Western Love Myth. Ironically, narrating that myth usually dwells upon love's beginning, finding a soulmate. Like most couples who are blissfully happy and stay together a long time, we did not usually discuss our relation with others, sort of like not eating a candy bar in front of those who don't have one, common courtesy. But under the surface, I/we knew something else lurked in the background—Shakespeare caught this aspect of the myth's trajectory and speeded it up in *Romeo and Juliet*. If you gain Love for a lifetime, then one of you has to see the other through to death, with nothing much left to live for. And you walk through a door, forever changed, aware of the mundanity of death, the coming and going, the absolute passing, and the transitory life you had. Those of us who are marked in this way recognize each other and form a tribe others don't see.

Many people have surrounded me with their love and support. Perhaps most important to me has been a long-distance phone relation with a sister widow in Chicago, Kate Kane. Kate was one of Chuck's students at Northwestern and called me within a week or two after Chuck's death. She suggested we talk on the phone every day. We do, and we think about writing a book together, *The Widow's Body*. We trace the course of grief in our lives and that of other folks, mostly women who we know; we discuss film studies and college teaching; we even discuss widowlit, those dreadful advice books for those in mourning. (We did find one good poetry book, *The Cure for Sorrow*, by Jan Richardson.) What I have learned from Kate is how differently people deal with grief. My way has been involving myself in tasks to preserve Chuck's legacy.

Chuck was a packrat, a trait hard to live with but incredibly valuable in terms of his library and papers, which now give a rich, internationally oriented, sexually queer, and theoretically sophisticated overview of film scholarship, especially from the 1970s on. And Marxism, and cultural studies, and theater, and the avant-garde across the arts, etc.. Early on after his death, I posted as many of his essays as I could on academia.edu, and later threw myself into developing a website with all his teaching materials. I had to stop that because in my crazed state, I had put up PDFs of all his research materials that I found on his computer as well, ignoring copyright. I will get back to building that site in the next year, leaving a copy of his hard drive—wildly filled with porn in addition to his course notes, writing fragments, and downloaded academic articles—to whatever library takes his papers.

Ah, Chuck's papers! What a story there. He lived in mounds of papers, boxes of them. I had to get at them right away, to find the necessary documents for all the legal work that accompanies death. I sorted some of the papers roughly, had a lot of trash hauled away (yes, it might have been valuable), hired a wonderful local declutterer, and got it all down to about 150-200 bankers boxes, including what was in a storage shed. For about a year and a half, I have been working with a local scholar, Jeneé Wilde, and we have catalogued and organized all these papers into about sixty boxes. At first it seemed like shoveling out the Augean stables, and with my magical thinking at the time, I imagined Chuck's sad reaction if he could see how I cleaned up his beloved mess. Now I have pride in what we have done, since the outlines of all things he was working on stand out so clearly.

My next task is to find a home for Chuck's papers and library. I myself have a much more zen attitude toward my own intellectual work and throw out many things regularly, both from my computer and my file cabinet, although like Chuck, I do keep most of my work available on the Internet through academia.edu. Keeping *Jump Cut* functioning is a way of staying sane, so we'll go for at least one more issue, with luck, and maybe another after that.

Julia Lesage, October 2019, Eugene OR

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